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CREATING POST–COLD WAR EUROPE: 1989 AND THE ARCHITECTURE OF ORDER

A whole generation emerged in the disappearing.

—East German Jana Hensel, age thirteen in 1989

This city, of all cities, knows the dream of freedom.

—Barack Obama, in Berlin, 2008¹

On November 9, 1989, the Berlin Wall opened and the world changed. Memory of that iconic instant has, unsurprisingly, retained its power despite the passage of time. Evidence of its enduring strength was apparent in the decision by a later icon of change—Barack Obama—to harness it in his own successful pursuit of one of history’s most elusive prizes, the U.S. presidency. While a candidate in 2008, he decided that the fall of the wall still represented such a striking symbol that it was worth valuable time away from American voters in a campaign summer to attach himself to it.

He also knew that lasting images had resulted from the Cold War visits of Presidents John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan to divided Berlin, and hoped to produce some of his own on a trip to the united city. In particular, Obama wanted to use the Brandenburg Gate, formerly a prominent site of the wall, as the backdrop for his first speech abroad as the clear Democratic nominee in summer 2008. However, the politics of the memory involved were still so vital that the right-of-center leader of Germany, Chancellor Angela Merkel—herself a former East German—decided to prevent Obama from appropriating them. She informed him that he did not have her permission to speak at the gate. It might be too evocative and look like an attempt by the German government to influence the U.S. election. Supporters of Obama’s opponent, Senator John McCain, welcomed Merkel’s decision; they derided the Berlin visit as an act of hubris that revealed a candidate playing statesman before his time. Undeterred, Obama chose instead to deliver his address as near as possible, at the Victory Column just down the street. The less emotional venue still drew two hundred thousand people to share the experience. “This city, of all cities, knows the dream of freedom,” he told the cheering crowd.

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Fig. 1.1. Barack Obama in Berlin, July 24, 2008. Courtesy of Getty Images.

“When you, the German people, tore down that wall—a wall that divided East and West; freedom and tyranny; fear and hope—walls came tumbling down around the world. From Kiev to Cape Town, prison camps were closed, and the doors of democracy were opened.”² The speech and the campaign succeeded brilliantly. Later in 2008, on the night that would turn Obama into the first African American president, he even returned in spirit to Berlin. In his victory speech in Chicago, he intoned a list of great changes. After remembering the dawn of voting rights for all and the steps of the first men on the moon, he added simply, “a wall came down in Berlin.”³

Although Obama could celebrate the collapse of the wall as an example of peaceful change, no one knew whether or not that would be the case in 1989. Its opening had yielded not only joy but also some extremely frightening questions. Would Germans demand rapid unification in a massive nationalistic surge that would revive old animosities? Would Soviet troops in East Germany stay in their barracks? Would Gorbachev stay in power or would hard-liners oust him for watching the wall fall while failing to get anything in return? Would Communist countries in the rest of Central Europe subsequently expire violently and leave bloody scars? Would centrally planned economies immediately implode and im-

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poverish millions of Europeans?⁴ Would West European social welfare systems and market economies be able to absorb these new crowds, or be swamped by them? Would millions of young East Europeans like the thirteen-year-old Jana Hensel, who would later write the best-selling *After the Wall* about the shock of the transformation, be able to master the personal and psychological challenges of such a massive transition?⁵ Would international institutions survive the challenges to come or descend into disabling disagreements about the future?

There was little doubt, in short, that history had reached a turning point; but the way forward was not obvious. With hindsight we know that the transition stayed peaceful, but why is less clear—through design, dumb luck, or both? Put another way, how can we best understand what happened in 1989 and its aftermath?

A generation of analysts has interpreted this year as a period of closure.⁶ I see it differently: as a time not of ending, but of beginning. The Cold War order had long been under siege and its collapse was nearly inevitable by 1989. Yet there was nothing at all inevitable about what followed. This book seeks to explain not the end of the Cold War but the struggle to create post-Cold War Europe. It attempts to solve the following puzzles: Why were protesters on the ground able to force dramatic events to a climax in 1989? Why did the wall open on November 9? Why did the race to recast Europe afterward yield the present arrangement and not any of the numerous alternatives? Why did the “new” world order in fact look very much like the old, despite the momentous changes that had transpired?

To answer these questions, I examined the actors, ideas, images, material factors, and politics involved. Remarkable human stories emerged at every turn—from a dissident who smuggled himself back into East Germany after being thrown out, to the television journalists who opened the Berlin Wall without knowing they were doing so, to the pleading of Gorbachev’s wife with a Western diplomat to protect her husband from himself, to the way that Vladimir Putin personally experienced 1989 in Dresden as a Soviet spy.

I will describe my findings in detail in the pages to come, but a few of them merit highlighting here. This book will challenge common but mistaken assumptions that the opening of the wall was planned, that the United States continuously dominated events afterward, and that the era of German reunification is now a closed chapter, without continuing consequences for the transatlantic alliance. I will show how, if there were any one individual to emerge as the single most important leader in the construction of post-Cold War Europe, it would have to be Kohl rather than Bush, Gorbachev, or Reagan; how Mitterrand was an uneasy but crucial facilitator of German unity, not its foe; and how Russia got left on the periphery as Germany united and the EC and NATO expanded, generating fateful

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Fig. 1.2. Vladimir Putin, future leader of Russia, poses with his parents in 1985 just before departing for his KGB posting to Dresden, East Germany. Courtesy of Getty Images.

resentments that shape geopolitics to this day. More broadly, I will question the enduring belief of U.S. policymakers that “even two decades later, it is hard to see how the process of German unification could have been handled any better.” From a purely American point of view, this belief is understandable; but it is not universally shared. The international perspective in these pages will yield a more critical interpretation of 1989–90. To cite just one example, the former British Foreign Minister Hurd does indeed think that better alternatives were conceivable. In 1989–90 there was a theoretical opportunity “which won’t come again, which Obama does not have, to remake the world, because America was absolutely at the pinnacle of its influence and success.” Put another way, “you could argue that if they had been geniuses, George Bush and Jim Baker would have sat down in 1990 and said the whole game is coming into our hands.” They would have concluded that “we’ve got now an opportunity, which may not recur, to remake the world, update everything, the UN, everything. And maybe if they had been Churchill and Roosevelt, you know, they might have done that.” But Hurd finds that “they weren’t that kind of person, neither of them. George Bush had famously said he didn’t do the vision thing.” In short, “they weren’t visionaries, and nor were we.”⁷ Hurd remembers that they played it safe, which was sensible and indeed his preference, but that they may have let a big opportunity go by.

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In exploring these questions, this book will focus on the contentious international politics of German unification that were at the heart of the creation of post–Cold War Europe. Many nations contributed to the demise of the old order over a series of decades in the past, but it was the contest over the terms of German unity that decided the future.⁸ The dramatic months of transition between November 1989 and the end of 1990—the focus of this book—produced decisions about political order that have shaped international relations in the decades since.

This transition was swift, but its brevity does not negate its importance.⁹ Changes do not need to be slow moving to be significant. Astronomers believe that the entire universe arose from a single instantaneous Big Bang, the consequences of which still determine life today. There is obviously an interplay between long-term and proximate causes; but the emphasis here will be very much on the events immediately surrounding the collapse of the wall and on the ways in which the new order emerged.

The argument of the book is as follows. For roughly a year following the collapse of the old order in November 1989, various groups of actors—some leaders of nation-states, and some not—competed and struggled vigorously to re-create order in a way most advantageous to themselves. The longer-term goal, of course, was to dominate that order in the post–Cold War world. Ultimately, Bonn and Washington, working together, would win this competition, but that was not a foregone conclusion. The legacy of their victory still has profound consequences for international relations today.

To explain how they won, I contend that we should follow the lead of the main participants in events by adopting their own metaphoric understanding of what was happening. Again and again, in multiple languages, key actors in 1989–90 employed the terminology of architecture to describe what they wanted: to start building anew, to construct a European roof or a common European home, to create a new transatlantic architecture, and so on. Leaders consciously proposed a number of competing blueprints for the future and described them as such. This metaphoric understanding, on top of its grounding in historical evidence, is an apt one for a study centered on Berlin, where so much real architecture went up after the wall came down. As a result, I will use this metaphor as the organizing strategy for the pages to follow; it will, I hope, make sense of a story playing out on many levels and in many locales simultaneously.¹⁰ This book thus conceives of the competition of 1989–90 as an architectural one, where various models of future order—some more promising than others—competed against one another.

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I must acknowledge that the use of phrases evocative of building—such as “constructed” and “fabricated”—has become a common scholarly method of questioning whether an objective reality exists. That is not the sense in which such phrases will be employed here, however. Rather, the metaphor is a more simple-minded one. It is the adoption of terminology from a field that has a similar goal to politics; in other words, politicians and architects want the same thing. They are both seeking permission to fabricate the future. Moreover, the idea of an architectural contest is helpful because it creates an awareness of ongoing episodes of competition. In such a contest, winning the selection round by no means guarantees that the victor will actually get to erect anything. It is one thing to wow the clients with a model, but quite another to get it actually built. Like politicians, architects must continue to cater to their supporters as they remove old detritus, prepare the site, and secure the necessary building permits. They rarely have the luxury of beginning work on a green field—the architectural equivalent of a blank slate. But there are consolations; one is that the process is path dependent. Put another way, once the foundation is laid according to the new blueprints, it is hard to remove. The normative power of the factual, a favorite concept of German theorists, comes into play; facts on the ground are difficult to change.¹¹ The legacy of both architectural and political decisions will last for decades, centuries, and even millennia, once the concrete is poured. It is therefore crucial to be the first to lay that foundation.¹²

The competition of 1989–90 centered on a specific future building site—that is, the center of divided Europe. Despite the fact that the Cold War conflict took place across the globe over a number of decades, it originated in Europe, and this book shows that the endgame was European as well.¹³ Europe was the site of the culminating round not only of a contest of geopolitical power but also of modernities. Put another way, the Cold War was not just a military standoff but also a conflict between two completely different visions of modernity: a Western versus a Soviet one.¹⁴ Ensuring victory for the Western model would, participants in events believed, signify not just a material but also an ideological triumph in the contest to define what was modern. Indeed, years later, both the Reagan and Bush presidential libraries would choose to display portions of the former Berlin Wall as trophies on their grounds; each wanted to lay claim to the success. In short, 1989–90 was the final round in a competition that was long-running, multi-layered, and profoundly significant.

During this final round, what specific models for the future did the key actors propose? This book will describe them in detail, after an introductory summary (in chapter 1) of why November 1989 became the moment that the models were

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launched. Chapters 2 through 4 will then focus on the four major variants, listed here in the chronological order in which they appeared.

(1) To begin with, in late 1989, there was the Soviet *restoration model*. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) hoped to use its weight as a victor in the Second World War to restore the old quadripartite mechanism of four-power control exactly as it used to be in 1945, before subsequent layers of Cold War modifications created room for German contributions. Moscow wanted to strip away those layers and revert to the legal status it had enjoyed at the start of the occupation. This model, which called for the reuse of the old Allied Control Commission to dominate all further proceedings in divided Germany, represented a realist vision of politics run by powerful states, each retaining their own sociopolitical order, whether liberal democratic or socialist, and pursuing their own interests.

(2) Next and almost contemporaneously, there was Kohl's *revivalist model*. This variant represented the revival, or adaptive reuse, of a confederation of German states. Such a Germanic confederation had not actually existed since the nineteenth century (Nazi expansion notwithstanding). It had endured rhetorically, however, into the period of détente—"two states in one German nation" was a common phrase—and it was now to be revived in reality for two twenty-first-century Germanies. This latter-day "confederationism" blurred the lines of state sovereignty. Each of the Germanies would maintain its own political and social order, but the two would share a confederative, national roof. There were echoes of this idea on a large scale; Mitterrand speculated about creating a Europe of confederations, yet neither Kohl's version nor the French idea was ever fully developed. Originally intended as serious options, they (like Gorbachev's initial restoration model) would be overtaken by events more quickly than anyone imagined.¹⁵

(3) Next, in early 1990, there was Gorbachev's challenge to his own original plan: a *heroic model* of multinationalism. Gorbachev dropped the restoration concept entirely and instead proposed to build a vast new edifice from the Atlantic to the Urals: the fulfillment of his desire to create a common European home of many rooms.¹⁶ States under this model would retain their own political orders, but cooperate via international economic and military institutions. This model was heroic in the architectural sense of the word, which is much more ambivalent than the popular usage; indeed, "heroism" is a term that has fallen into disrepute among architects. The era of heroic modernism in the twentieth century produced a number of utopian design exercises, sometimes explicitly in the service of political regimes, that proved to be illusory or misguided. Gorbachev's vision fit into this pattern: it was sweeping in intent, but it was also fatally uncompromising. Ironically, former East German dissident movements, having done so much

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to unsettle Soviet control, proposed a similar model. They wanted new construction as well, though of a more limited expanse. Their goal was the construction of an improved socialism in East Germany, with a curiously prescient kind of “property pluralism” that would allow both private property and state intervention in times of economic crisis.¹⁷

(4) Finally, the Western allies, and Kohl in particular, responded in 1990 with the fourth and winning proposal: the *prefab model*. In other words, the United States and West Germany convincingly made the case for taking the West’s prefabricated institutions, both for domestic order and international economic and military cooperation, and simply extending them eastward. This institutional-transfer model had the advantage of being quick, and dealing in known and successful commodities, such as the West German Basic Law, the West German currency (or DM), and the Article 5 mutual defense guarantee of NATO, to name a few. Indeed, the fact that both the EC and NATO were structurally capable of expansion (and had already been enlarged from their original footprints) provided useful precedents. The prefab model was the one model that proposed to harmonize both domestic and international institutions in Eastern Europe to pre-set Western standards. Moreover, it helped Kohl to justify his drive for rapid unity to skeptical West Europeans. When faced with the question of how to reconcile his neighbors to a process that might well threaten the delicate balance of strength within the EC, Kohl, already one of the more pro-European leaders of his generation, could argue that German unity was an extension of European integration.¹⁸ Just as West and East would unify within existing German structures, so too would West and East join under the existing EC institutions.

There was a large disadvantage to the prefab model, though. This disadvantage was not that prefab represented inferior goods; quite to the contrary, Western institutions had proven themselves to be durable and successful. Rather, it was the issue of perpetuating structures fabricated for a divided world into an undivided one, thus raising the issue of whether such a construct would in fact be suitable for the new site. Even as borders were dissolving, in other words, political institutions created and shaped by the decades-long Cold War *division* of international politics would exert and extend themselves eastward over a *unified* world. This was a necessary decision, born of the need to move quickly, with fateful consequences. Extending Cold War structures was a quick fix. But these structures, conceived in hostility, could not easily be recast to accommodate the great enemy—the Slavic other—because their original function was to resist that enemy. As the former secretary of state, Baker, later observed in his memoirs about this era, “almost every achievement contains within its success the seeds

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of a future problem.” He was right; the problem in this case was that no clear place was carved out for Russia, while a window of potential cooperation between Russia and the West was open. Before long, it closed, and the opportunity was lost.¹⁹

In addition, designers of all four models had to deal with an overarching contradiction in 1989–90. The competition among their models of order unfolded in an extremely disorderly way. It commenced unexpectedly, with East European states and the Soviet Union itself all on the verge of collapse, and took place between a number of competitors of unequal size and resources. The struggle to create a new order oscillated between, on the one hand, the highly public events dominated by the crowds or electorates, and on the other, the behind-the-scenes maneuverings of political elites, who could make agreements in secret, but ultimately would have to face the public again.

If these were the four most prominent models, who got to choose among them? Initially, by dint of the timing of their first free election since the Weimar era, it fell de facto to the voters of East Germany to choose from candidates representing these models. The electorate had a clear choice among parties supporting each of the four options (as well as other, less likely ones). The fate of any given model depended partly on its merits and partly on the ability of its designers to convince the public that they were more competent than their competitors.²⁰

In the eyes of the East Germans, the contest ultimately came down to a choice between Gorbachev’s heroic attempt to build a mansion of many rooms, preserving some part of the old socialist order, and the wholesale adoption of the prefabricated institutions of the West. The latter won definitively. While there was some sympathy for expansive new multinational construction, the majority of these new voters felt that the safest option was proven structures to be put in place by proven politicians. As a result, the Western model under the leadership of Kohl would win, but not without some gloves-off power politics—particularly with regard to Poland and NATO—and not without problems in implementation.

If the East Germans got the initial say (and the timing of their input was significant), it was ultimately Germany’s neighbors, East and West, who had to agree with what was proposed. Most importantly, the Soviet Union had the ability to cause enormous problems for Kohl. Even though the USSR was on the verge of ruin, it held legal rights emanating from World War II and maintained roughly four hundred thousand troops in East Germany; these facts gave Gorbachev leverage regardless of his situation at home. As a result, even after the prefab model emerged as the winner, Kohl still had to secure building permits to start work, and that process is the subject of chapter 5.

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Fig. 1.3. The Berlin Wall in front of the Brandenburg Gate, November 1989. Courtesy of Gerard Marlie/AFP/Getty Images.

Finally, this book’s conclusion will look at the legacy of the contest of 1989 and 1990. It will discuss how, as in many architectural competitions, the model that won was not the most visionary one. Given all of the constraints involved, it was the most workable in the time frame available. It demonstrated the authority of competence crucial to all successful architecture and politics, and that proved decisive in the end. But workable is not the same as ideal, so it is necessary to be clear about the seeds of future problems that were sown by its victory.

In short, if Berlin is indeed the phoenix-like city that slowly rose from the ashes of Nazism and the Cold War division to realize “the dream of freedom,” then we need to understand how that happened, and at what cost it was achieved. Historians have already put a great deal of effort into analyzing the earlier decades of the division of Europe. Now it is time to think about the struggle of 1989 and what it bequeathed to the post-Cold War world.