

[Conference report '1989 and the West', Utrecht University, 20-21 April 2017](#)

Announcement published by Eleni Braat on Tuesday, May 23, 2017

Type:

Workshop

Date:

April 20, 2017

Location:

Netherlands

Subject Fields:

Contemporary History, Diplomacy and International Relations, European History / Studies, Political History / Studies

Conference Report: 1989 and the West. New Perspectives on the Consequences of the End of the Cold War

Utrecht University, 20-21 April 2017

How did the End of the Cold War affect Western Europe? For decades, scholars have mostly focused on tracing causes and consequences of the Eastern half of the continent. The West, it seemed, was unaffected by the Fall of the Berlin Wall. If anything, this only seemed to confirm the victory narrative of the Western political and economic model which the East adopted in the 1990s. The recent crises which sweep across the West - whether in relation to Russia, the rise of populism, or the resistance against neoliberalism - cast a shadow over this scholarly reading of the consequences of the end of the Cold War. The question how the End of the Cold War has affected the West is therefore of major importance.

Throughout the 1980s, when *les trente glorieuses* had come to an end, three processes emerged that seemed to confirm Francis Fukuyama's 'end of history' thesis. Firstly, the Western view on international security, which focussed on European integration and NATO, seemed confirmed by the arms race, the Single European Act, and European expansion. Secondly, the economy recovered from the slowdown of the 1970s and this instilled faith in the ideology, neoliberalism, which underpinned the economic growth. Lastly, democracy - more specifically a democracy centred on parliaments, parties and professional politicians - seemed solidly in place in the 1980s. Although the end of the Cold War is a widely studied subject, new perspectives on the triumphalism of these three processes are much needed, as they are currently all being questioned.

Therefore, the History Department at Utrecht University hosted a workshop entitled '1989 and the West: New Perspectives on the Consequences of the End of the Cold War', on the 20th and 21st of April 2017. Scholars from Italy, Germany, the United States, Belgium, Great Britain, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Portugal gathered to discuss ways in which the end of Cold War influenced the West and to offer new perspectives on this issue.

During two days, four panels and a keynote lecture discussed the consequences of the end of the Cold

War in the West. The panels focussed on the following subjects: a new Germany in a new Europe; neoliberalism in and beyond the nation state; remaking Europe after 1989; and populism and identity politics after the Cold War. The workshop was opened with remarks by Pepijn Corduwener, who posed three central questions to be answered during the two-day workshop: Which narratives, political practices and institutions were strengthened by 1989 and which fell by the wayside? How should we conceptualise the legacy of 1989? And if we tend to speak of the former Soviet bloc and the former East, would it make sense to speak of the 'Former West'?

The first panel, focussing on a new Germany in a new Europe, was opened by Ubaldo Villani-Lubelli (University of Salento/Ruhr University). He presented a paper on the role the new German power will play in the future European Union and argued that Germany, as an economic hegemon, is likely to assume a leading role. Christian Wicke (Utrecht University) focussed on the normalisation of German identity and argued that, even though the German normality is ontologically, territorially and ideologically achieved, the historiographical normalisation remains unachieved. Therefore, the negative aspects of German history continue to influence German identity. Adam Seipp (Texas A&M University) discussed the process of conversion of American military properties in Western Germany to the new German state after 1989 and the socioeconomic and cultural gap it left. Discussant Jacco Pekelder (Utrecht University) summarised the three presentations as the consolidation of a German self-image as Germany as a 'civilian power' in the world.

In the second panel, 'Neoliberalism in and beyond the nation state', Anaïs van Ertvelde (Leiden University) discussed how the end of the Cold War influenced Belgian policymaking and civil society, through the lens of disability policy. She concluded that, after 1989, the influence of new social movements and neoliberalism became intertwined, which caused the deconstruction of the old dichotomy between government and market. Bram Mellink and P.W. Zuidhof (both University of Amsterdam) continued along comparable lines, by arguing that after 1989 the market was no longer an external critique of the state. Rather, it transformed into an internal principle of the state, or 'roll in' as Mellink and Zuidhof named it. They argued that the end of the Cold War worked as a catalyst for this process. Discussant Annelien de Dijn (University of Amsterdam) noted that the liberal consensus that followed 1989 is currently being threatened, for instance by nationalism and religion, and she thereby problematised Fukuyama's end of history thesis.

In the third panel, centred on remaking Europe after 1989, Frank Gerits (University of Amsterdam) discussed how European relations with Africa reflected the European integration process. Gerits argued that the EU acted as a reluctant soft power during the 1990s, by performing a narrative of efficiency and good governance. Cristina Blanco Sio-Lopez (New University of Lisbon) added to this, by arguing that the EU is becoming increasingly pragmatic and technocratic. She also stated there is a growing distance between the European electorate and its political representatives in the EU. This gap was caused by failing to take the window of opportunity in the early 1990s and the enlargement fatigue in 2004. Laurien Crump (Utrecht University) discussed her paper on the consequences of the end of the Cold War for Western European relations with Russia. She maintained that the Fall of the Berlin Wall closed the possibility of Russia's return to Europe: after 1989, Russia was not included in the European integration process and attempts to strengthen the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe failed. Discussant Carlos Reijnen (University of Amsterdam) linked the three papers together by concluding how they all focussed on the role of the EU after 1989, but from different dynamics and perspectives.

The fourth and final panel was dedicated to populism and identity politics after the Cold War. Nicolaas Kraft van Ermel (University of Groningen) explained that until 1989, European history writing was frozen. The end of the Cold War and European integration, however, caused it to unfreeze - Timothy Snyder's *Bloodlands* was named an influential example of the unfreezing of history. Still, Kraft van Ermel argues, Western historical narratives have been unable to integrate Eastern European perspectives on history, even though this is much needed. Jesper Vespermark Køber (University of Copenhagen) stated that the image of Western triumphalism overlooks the doubt about democracy in the West itself. Vespermark Køber argues there is a widening gap between citizens and electorates. This causes disbelief in the democratic system, of which the far right now takes advantage. Hanco Jürgens (Germany Institute Amsterdam) elaborated on the fundamental change of the Dutch imagined community. In the 1980s, the Netherlands were a guiding nation and the Dutch identity was an export product. By 2002 this had changed, because of the multicultural society and the rise of populism, which caused the Dutch identity to come under pressure. Discussant Sarah de Lange (University of Amsterdam) provided comments on the three papers separately and tied them together thematically.

The workshop was highlighted by the keynote lecture of Dan Stone (Royal Holloway, University of London) on the return of fascism in Europe. Although the current circumstances and main drivers are different from the 1930s, Stone argued that fascism is returning to Europe - mainly as a response to neoliberalism. He explained that fascism is being adapted, so that it both draws on ideas from the past and takes new energy from current-day issues, such as xenophobia, extreme nationalism and economic protectionism. The end of the Cold War accelerated the deconstruction of the post-WWII consensus, and the forces that kept fascism away after 1989 have vanished, which caused fascism to rise again. However, discussant Beatrice de Graaf responded that end of the Cold War was not as influential as 1945 or 9/11 to the rise of fascism, regarding the emotional, psychological and moral discourse. This contributed, according to De Graaf, to a sense of insecurity and fear, which causes people to make irrational choices: Dan Stone characterises this as the rise of fascism.

Eleni Braat concluded the workshop by tying together the panels and the keynote lecture, and by answering the three main questions posed in the opening of the workshop. Braat stated the workshop emphasized the importance of 1989 as a catalyst, because many contributors stressed that several developments were already under way in the 1980s and only strengthened by 1989. Another joint conclusion held that 1989 was followed by several missed opportunities. Most importantly, connecting Eastern and Western Europe through European integration and an inclusive historiography failed. In conclusion, the two-day workshop facilitated original debates on the consequences of the end of the Cold War and the end of history thesis, thereby providing new topics for further research.

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