
URL: http://tiny.cc/AR583

Review by Simon Miles, The University of Texas at Austin

With the conflict in Afghanistan drawing to a close, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) finds itself yet again at a crossroads, with the conflict that constituted its most recent raison d'être no longer buttressing the alliance. This is not, however, the first time NATO has had to confront an uncertain future. As Kristina Spohr of the London School of Economics and Political Science illustrates in her article in Cold War History, “Germany, America and the shaping of post-Cold War Europe,” NATO had to reinvent itself — or rather, be reinvented by its members — in the aftermath of the Cold War and German reunification. The latter, Spohr argues, precipitated the transformation of NATO from a military alliance into a “Genscherised” version of itself (i.e., along the lines prescribed by West German foreign minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher), a political institution focusing on cooperative security, shared values across the Iron Curtain, arms control, and which legitimized the continued presence of U.S. troops in Europe.

“The story of 1989–90,” Spohr emphasizes, “is indeed a story of contingencies” (222). She identifies three episodes as turning-points in the story of German reunification and NATO’s post–Cold War transformation: West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl’s Ten-Point Program for reunification, promulgated on 28 November 1989; the meetings between President George H. W. Bush and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev at Malta on 2–3 December 1989 and Bush and Kohl at Laeken on 3 December 1989; and Genscher’s Tutzing speech of 31 January 1990. Bush and Kohl sought the same end: a unified Germany within NATO.

For Kohl, unifying Germany offered him and the country he led “real international emancipation after four decades of political inferiority” (223). For Bush, supporting unification was a means of re-ordering Europe at the expense of a retreating Soviet Union, as well as of maintaining NATO’s — and thus the United States’ position — in Europe. The two were not conventional partners in this endeavor, however. Bush understood from the outset of his presidency that change was afoot in Europe, and believed that ending the Cold War required ending the division of Europe and Germany. But U.S. policy-makers had been suspicious of West
German initiative since the era of Ostpolitik and feared that they might make a Faustian bargain with the Kremlin: unification for neutrality.

While Bush reacted to the fall of the Berlin Wall with restraint and exhorted others to do the same — he was criticized by the U.S. media for “his lack of jubilation” — Kohl seized the opportunity to advance his agenda for unification as well as his international position (226). The Ten-Point Program he presented shortly after the fall of the Wall appeared to observers in Washington to be a plan for reunification which bypassed the so-called ‘victor powers:’ France, the United Kingdom, the United States, and the Soviet Union. It made no mention of a timetable for such an undertaking nor of a unified Germany’s membership in NATO, prompting Secretary of State James A. Baker III to enumerate four conditions for U.S. support of German unification, focusing on continued German membership in NATO and the European Community (EC).

The question of German NATO membership was at the forefront of Bush’s thinking when he met with Gorbachev at Malta in late 1989. There, Bush’s first priority was not relations with Bonn, but with Moscow: after the Tiananmen Square Massacre in Beijing, the president wanted to be sure that Red Army troops in Eastern Europe would not respond to the fall of the Wall with similar force. Gorbachev made it clear that the Kremlin would allow reunification, emboldening Bush to push for reunification on the terms the United Stated sought (which had been enumerated by Baker), including full NATO membership. In return, Bush pledged “no triumphalism” from Washington (230). From Malta, Bush proceeded to meet with Kohl at Laeken, outside Brussels, on the eve of a meeting of the North Atlantic Council. Kohl laid out his plan for German unification and his commitment to pursuing reunification gradually, winning over the President, whom he had surprised days earlier with his Ten-Point Plan.

Kohl’s gradualism did not suit his foreign minister, Genscher, who used a speech at Tutzing to stake out a role for himself in the process of unification separate from that of the Chancellor (who in the coalition government was also his political rival). Genscher tackled the issues of European security post-unification head on: primarily concerned with assuaging Moscow’s potential fears, he pledged that while a unified Germany would be a NATO member, formerly East German territory would remain outside the alliance’s military purview. In the future, as Genscher saw it, NATO and the Warsaw Pact would shift from confrontation towards cooperation, becoming the foundation for cooperative security in Europe. From that point on, German reunification would be a given in superpower talks, with Gorbachev giving his explicit consent at the 31 May–1 June 1990 summit in Washington.

Thanks to Kohl’s and Genscher’s initiatives, Spohr argues, this process was not dictated solely by the superpowers or the victors of World War II, but by a “2+4” framework, putting the two Germanies on an equal footing to the victor powers (239). The United States may have taken the lead in pushing for a reinvention of NATO as a political organization, but, Spohr argues, the seed of this idea was planted by Genscher in his Tutzing speech envisioning a cooperative, pan-European security system. “The Kohl government,” she concludes, “came to negotiate, bargain and effectively act on par with both the [United States] and the USSR” (243). But Kohl and Genscher found willing partners in Washington and (eventually) Moscow, with whom they agreed on basic principles; one wonders how effective West German initiative would have been if it run counter to the goals of one or both of the superpowers. While Kohl did, for example, persuade Bush to support his Ten-Point Program over dinner at Laeken, the President was already committed to supporting NATO membership by dint of longstanding U.S. and NATO policy. Spohr’s analysis of the extent to which Kohl relied upon a permissive context to achieve his goals would have been a valuable inclusion to her account of the effectiveness of his diplomacy.
“Germany, America and the shaping of post-Cold War Europe” offers a compelling account of the redrawing of Europe and the reinvention of NATO — both of which came at the expense of a declining Soviet Union. Spohr’s analysis would perhaps be more accessible if it incorporated an English translation or précis for the lengthy quotes in German upon which much of her argument is built. Space permitting, it would also have been valuable for Spohr to have engaged more directly with the historiography of the late Cold War. On the meeting at Malta, for example, she seems to build on Joshua Shifrinson’s analysis of the declassified Malta memoranda of conversation; it would have been useful to have Spohr’s assessment of Shifrinson’s presentation of the summit as a framing and testing exercise with direct relevance to German reunification, though she reaches a similar conclusion.¹ On the role of the United States in general, one wonders whether Spohr would underscore Mary Elise Sarotte’s view that an excess of post-Reagan caution put the Bush administration “on the back foot” when it came to German reunification.² Other authors such as Raymond Garthoff and Don Oberdorfer also advance their own interpretations of the events of 1989–90 vis-à-vis Germany and of the specific re-ordering moments on which Spohr focuses.³ She brings valuable new sources and interpretations to the debate surrounding German reunification; it would have been interesting to have some direct engagement with earlier material on the subject.

Gorbachev’s role and circumstances also merit deeper engagement. In addition to the fact that U.S. and West German policy aligned and the promise of financial assistance from Bonn, Spohr ascribes Gorbachev’s surprising sanguinity in the face of German reunification to “various domestic pressures [and] the issue of international credibility” (241). It is easy to imagine, though, how these same factors could have propelled Gorbachev in exactly the opposite direction. He presided over a declining superpower that was shedding vassal states at an alarming rate (of which East Germany was the most valuable and hard-won), and faced considerable opposition within the Soviet Union from both nationalist and hard-line elements. As the January Events in Vilnius, Lithuania would show at the beginning of 1991, the Kremlin did not always take a permissive line on self-determination. It is not difficult to imagine Gorbachev working to retard German reunification and integration into NATO — which he de facto and de jure could have done — to assuage the hard-liners (who attempted to oust him in August 1991), to deter other nationalists seeking similar accommodations from Moscow across the Soviet Union, or to preserve the credibility of the Soviet Union as a superpower with its own sphere of influence. Fortunately, he did not; but it would have been valuable for Spohr to have included a more detailed account of Soviet decision-making in response to the West German and U.S. initiatives she details.

This is an exciting time for scholars who are interested in the end of the Cold War. The passage of time and the declassification of documents makes rigorous historical research very much a possibility. In light of present


debates regarding the Cold War’s legacies, how they shaped current Russian foreign policy, and repeated, historically misinformed charges of a “New Cold War,” this research is both doable and vital.

**Simon Miles** is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of History and a Fellow at the William P. Clements Jr. Center for National Security at the University of Texas at Austin. At present, he is a Visiting Fellow at the Bill Graham Centre for Contemporary International History at the University of Toronto. His doctoral research project, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, examines U.S.-Soviet relations from 1980 to 1985. Simon’s research has been published in *Diplomacy & Statecraft* and is forthcoming in *Diplomatic History*. He is a graduate of the University of Toronto and the London School of Economics and Political Science.

© 2016 The Authors
Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 United States License