

From the Fallen Wall to 'Open Skies' Canada's Diplomatic Role in the Reunification of Germany

Joe Clark

Volume 5, Number 2, December 2009

Le retour de l'histoire ? Répercussions européennes et internationales de la réunification allemande

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1001455ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1001455ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Le Centre canadien d'études allemandes et européennes

ISSN

1718-8946 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Clark, J. (2009). From the Fallen Wall to 'Open Skies': Canada's Diplomatic Role in the Reunification of Germany. *Eurostudia*, 5(2).
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1001455ar>

FROM THE FALLEN WALL TO 'OPEN SKIES' *Canada's Diplomatic Role in the Reunification of Germany**

Le Très Honorable Joe Clark
Premier Ministre du Canada (1979-1980)
Ministre des Affaires étrangères (1984-1991)

Je suis honoré de cette occasion qui m'est donnée de visiter le Goethe-Institut et de participer à vos échanges sur les incidences de l'unification de l'Allemagne.

Comme les dates sont des points de repère, j'entamerai mon propos en vous citant trois dates : le 9 novembre 1989, le 13 février 1990 et le 3 octobre 1990. La première et la dernière des ces dates sont bien connues – un peu avant minuit, le 9 novembre 1989, des milliers d'allemands de l'est ont afflué dans Berlin ouest, après que les autorités est-allemandes ont permis de franchir le mur de Berlin. La chute du mur allait devenir le symbole du début de la réunification de l'Allemagne.

Par ailleurs, le 3 octobre 1990 a marqué l'intégration des États de l'Allemagne de l'est à la République fédérale d'Allemagne.

Le 13 février 1990 est la date à laquelle le Canada a tenu la conférence des «Cielles Ouverts», la première rencontre mixte de l'histoire des ministres des affaires étrangères de l'Organisation du traité de l'Atlantique Nord – l'O.T.A.N. – et du pacte de Varsovie, l'alliance soviétique. Pendant plus de quatre décennies, ces deux organisations avaient symbolisé les profondes dissensions mortelles de la guerre froide. J'ai été l'hôte et j'ai présidé cette rencontre, à titre de secrétaire d'État aux affaires étrangères du Canada.

Nous voulions explicitement appliquer un principe qui a joué un rôle clé dans la fin de la guerre froide – à savoir «faire confiance, mais vérifier». Nous nous sommes donc réunis pour établir un programme de surveillance aérienne non armée de tout le territoire des deux alliances auparavant hostiles, pour que chacun



des anciens adversaires puisse voir — et vérifier — ce qui se passait chez l'autre. Évidemment, la conférence des «Ciels Ouverts» devait aussi symboliser la fin de l'antagonisme réciproque rigide de ces deux alliances.

As often happens, the most historic and enduring accomplishment of that conference was not on the agenda. It was to set in train the "two plus four" process, whereby the two Germanies — then East and West — would meet with the "four powers" established originally as the allied control authority to oversee the allied occupations zones in post-war Germany — the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union, the United States of America, and France — for the discussions and negotiations which led to the unification of Germany. At various times, my six colleagues — Douglas Hurd, Edouard Shevardnadze, Hans Dietrich Genscher, Oskar Fischer, Jim Baker, and Roland Dumas would steal away from discussions of aerial surveillance to focus on the immediate future of Germany.

One might say that Canada was an unlikely site for that first joint meeting of these European adversaries, or for the beginning of the "two plus four" process. In fact, it was a natural place, symbolizing that the cold war had stretched across continents, recognizing the significant role Canada had played in the design and success of N.A.T.O., the then C.S.C.E., and other institutions which ultimately contained the hostilities of that cold war, and located in a country where diverse peoples who might have been adversaries elsewhere found common ground.

When Europeans think of North America, the natural reference point is the U.S.A., because it is a larger country, and a superpower in politics, the economy and popular culture. Yet, Canada's connection to Europe may well be deeper and is certainly distinctive. In one sense, we have been a European society in a North American geography.

With regard to Europe, the United States and Canada differed at birth. The United States became a nation precisely to turn away from old European structures and values, and to create a new society on a new continent. Canada's purpose, by sharp contrast, was to transplant those old values in the new continent, to seek to improve an established civilization, and give it new life. If the U.S. conceived of itself as an "exception", we considered ourselves an *extension*.

Both our countries drew our original populations, and institutions, from Europe. But the U.S. saw its destiny as breaking from that past; we saw our destiny as a bridge, not a break. It is not accidental that bridging was the critical role we played in N.A.T.O., both in broadening the original purpose of the alliance to include the

“political clause” set out in article two, and in our capacity to moderate relations between Washington and Europe.

However, the very strength of that role in trans-Atlantic security institutions had masked a general drift away from the original tight connection between Canada and Europe. Europe became increasingly pre-occupied with the European Union; Canada was drawn inexorably into the size and dynamism of the American economy and culture. At the same time, we were developing interests and connections elsewhere in the world, notably in Asia. While Canada’s original immigration was heavily from Europe, for at least 40 years now, our major source of new Canadians has been from China and South Asia.

Canada and Europe were not growing apart, but we were not growing together as exclusively as we had in earlier times. What is notable in the context of this discussion about the repercussions of German Unification is that one of the strongest and most dynamic institutional connections between Europe and Canada had been N.A.T.O., an organization formed originally to deal with the threats inherent in a divided Germany.

The launch, in Ottawa, of the “two plus four” discussions was neither spontaneous nor uncontroversial. There had long been historic fears of a united Germany, apprehension about the economic and other impacts on Europe, and, most contentious of all, about the future military status of Germany in N.A.T.O., which Edouard Shevardnadze had described as “the mother of all questions”. Litterally the day before discussions of those issues began in Ottawa, Chancellor Kohl was in the Kremlin and secured President Gorbachov’s consent to proceed with a unification that would involve membership in N.A.T.O.

In Ottawa, itself, some of my fellow N.A.T.O. colleagues – most vocally, the Italian and the Dutch – wanted a voice in the profoundly European decision. That was not simply ego speaking, or a simple demand for a place at the table. One of the concerns, in Europe and elsewhere, was precisely that a unified Germany would, in time, consult less, and act more unilaterally. But the logic of “two plus four”, and the careful preparatory work, meant that we emerged from Ottawa with a process that was promising and intact.

One of the abiding frustrations of foreign policy is that, so often, despite enormous investments of time and resources, events move slowly – or they don’t seem to move at all – and when change does occur, it is incremental, sometimes almost invisible. Sometimes, however, change comes with a rush, like a dam bursting. That is what happened in the late 1980s when apparently all at once, the Berlin

wall fell, the Soviet Empire collapsed, and the demand for German Unification surged among the German people, particularly from the East.

Tom Delworth, the distinguished Canadian diplomat who was Canada's ambassador to Germany in that period recalled how quickly events moved then. Most of us had not heard of the word "tsunami" at the time, but in retrospect, that is what it felt like, with change cascading on change. Ambassador Delworth recalls that his challenge in reporting to Ottawa was "to try to explain yesterday before something new happened today." He was not alone. For example, the division of Germany was the *raison d'être* of N.A.T.O., and forward-planning is one of the organization's strengths and responsibilities. Yet there was no N.A.T.O. committee considering the consequences of unification, nor any significant work being done in its member states.

The German political scientist Werner Weidenfeld was one of the authors of the official history of German Unification commissioned by the German Chancellery, so was able to draw upon internal documents. He "makes it clear that initially the Kohl government had no strategic concept to deal with the East German people's demand for unification."¹

Weidenfeld characterizes the response as "improvisation as statecraft". The government of West Germany was a long-standing coalition, between chancellor Kohl's dominant "Christian democrats", and Mr. Genscher's "free democrats". The two men reflected significant differences of analysis and approach. They were sometimes in serious conflict – with the Chancellor leaving his coalition partner and foreign minister out of critical decisions – but the instincts of both was to seize the initiative to unite the Germans. And that was a real challenge.

Plusieurs États avaient exprimé de profondes réserves au sujet de l'unification de l'Allemagne, entre autres – et ce n'était pas les moindres – les quatre puissances qui avaient exercé leur autorité sur les zones d'occupation alliées. Madame le premier ministre Thatcher s'y opposait vivement. Il est devenu courant maintenant de citer l'auteur français François Mauriac qui a dit : «j'aime tellement l'Allemagne, que je préfère qu'il y en ait deux». Le président Mitterrand, quant à lui, même s'il était conscient et soucieux de sa relation avec le chancelier Kohl, souhaitait à tout le moins ralentir l'unification de l'Allemagne. Il espérait trouver un allié en la personne du président Gorbachov, mais ce dernier avait aussi ses propres préoccupations au sujet de l'Allemagne et de l'O.T.A.N. M. Gorbachov était aussi influencé par l'offre d'aide financière de l'Allemagne et dans une moindre mesure, par ses convictions personnelles envers le droit d'une nation à l'autodétermination. Du début à la fin, l'allié extérieur le plus important de

l'Allemagne s'est avéré le président américain George W. Bush qui avait la confiance en la lecture que faisait le chancelier Kohl de son pays et qui s'est montré convaincant à des égards importants, encourageant le président Gorbachov à accepter l'argument selon lequel le droit à l'autodétermination conférait à l'Allemagne le droit de choisir l'alliance à laquelle elle souhaitait appartenir.

While lacking the power of Washington, Canada was equally positive about unification. We were the first N.A.T.O. ally to declare our official support of the concept, and Prime Minister Mulroney was actively engaged in candid discussions at the time with both Chancellor Kohl and President Bush.

It is almost certainly true that being an ocean away affects the North American view of developments in Europe, including the critical question of German Unifications. In one sense, in this connected world, we all live in the same neighborhood, but our memories and perspectives are different. German commentators have observed that the memoirs of Americans, who were involved in these events, treated German Unification as one of a series of major changes in international affairs, while those events are, and were, closer to center stage in Europe.

But what were the major long-term consequences of that tsunami of events – television, the wall, unification – in 1989-90? Here are four, which seem significant to me.

First, very pragmatically, it led to acceptance of the Euro, which drove the European project forward.

Second, it ended the uncertainty about Germany's future, and allowed a generation of Germans to grow and mature in a country that was whole and not divided, and was thus more confident, and freer to be forward-looking.

Third, that forward-looking Germany is active in the world, investing, trading, manufacturing, maintaining a high level of development assistance, applying its unique knowledge of Eastern Europe, Eurasia and Russia, supporting multi0lateralism, acting as a leader in the European Union.

Fourth, unification validated the idea that people with different cultural backgrounds could be Germans together; it created a tradition of integration.

If Canada's experience is any indicator, that last point will become increasingly important. Germany's problem of the future is that it had one of the lowest birth-

rates in Europe, and is not rejuvenating itself naturally. It has a theoretical choice between immigration and decline, but decline is not an option, and that tradition of integration can prove invaluable in dealing with inevitable immigration. The management of diversity is an issue where Canada has had unusual experience and success, and is one of the fields where there is a real prospect of constructive collaboration between the two countries.

Another broad field of potential collaboration is in engaging the emerging world, the economies and societies whose relative influence is growing, and where Canada's credentials are strong. Germany will be a bulwark of the European Union, but it will not be confined by that relationship, in the same way that Canada should avoid being confined to North America.

This is an appropriate time to be drawing lessons from the series of events which included the unification of Germany. Although there is none of the drama of a physical wall falling, we are living now in another time of profound change in the established international order. Whether or not it is a "post-American world", as Fareed Zakharia styled it, there is no question that societies that were recently regarded merely as "emerging economies" will play a much more significant role across the range of international affairs – as countries, as cultures, as economies, as powers.

I want to conclude by referring to an intangible aspect of the "Open Skies" conference, twenty years ago, because the intangible consequences are often the most important.

The riveting human drama in that conference was to witness the relation in that meeting between the Soviet foreign minister, Edouard Shevardnadze, and his counterparts from the Warsaw Pact. As a person, Shevardnadze was charming, able, empathetic. He was widely respected, and genuinely liked, by his colleagues from both sides of the old wall. More than that, he was seen as a reformer – an advocate and agent of the transformations which had brought the cold war to a close.

But the high personal regard which Edouard Shevardnadze enjoyed as an individual was eclipsed by the accumulated anger and resentment of the former satellite states against the Soviet centre. Moscow had run the Warsaw Pact with an iron hand, and then Moscow's dominance fell with the wall. While no one was outright rude, many of his colleagues missed no chance to make Shevardnadze aware of his, and his country's, diminished status. Suddenly, one of my responsibilities as host and chair was to protect the sensibilities of this recent

superpower superstar, and help him navigate through the first meeting where a Soviet minister sat as a mere equal.

I have at home a piece of that Berlin wall – a small tangible fragment of History. But the most significant walls that fell were intangible, including that evaporation of the formerly absolute authority of the old Soviet Union; the advent and embrace of more economies and more democratic societies; the decline in the control of two superpowers; and, consequently the dramatic increase in the ability of nations, economies, and individuals to set and pursue their own goals.

Events are less important than their consequences – because it is these consequences which change the way the world sees itself. The East Germans who streamed through that fallen wall were only a tiny minority of the people, around the globe, whose lives changed profoundly. The Warsaw Pact foreign ministers, rearing up against Edouard Shevardnadze, were only symbols of the millions of people who, in months and years to come, felt a freedom of *manœuvre* they had never known before.

I don't seek to exaggerate the extent of these changes – not all economies grew as predicted, not all citizens took control of their lives, several of the systems which call themselves “democratic” are seriously deficient. But those serial changes – the erosion of the Soviet Union, the electric capacity of television to broadcast that change, the fall of the wall, the unification of Germany – changed more than borders and economies. It transformed the way we saw ourselves, and what we could become. That is the context in which we should consider whether the events of 1989-90 precipitated “un retour” or a different kind of future.

Notes

* Ce texte est tiré de l'allocation prononcée par M. Joe Clark le jeudi 30 septembre 2010 dans le cadre du colloque international: Le retour de l'Histoire: Répercussions européennes et internationales de la réunification allemande. Vous pouvez visionner cette allocution, à l'adresse suivante : <http://www.viddler.com/explore/GermanStudies/videos/5/>

This text is transcribed from Mr. Joe Clark's speech pronounced on Thursday, September 30th, 2010 at the International Conference: The Return of History: European and International Outbreaks After the German Reunification. You can watch a recording of this speech, at the following address: <http://www.viddler.com/explore/GermanStudies/videos/5/>

¹ “German Unification : Between Official History, Academic Scholarship, and political Memoirs” by Christina Spohr, The Historical Journal, Vol. 43, No. 3, September 2000, p.873