

Helmut Kohl: The Chancellor Who United Germany

By Angelique Sohn

On November 9, 1989, after a series of unimaginable and arguably unintentional events, the gates at the Bornholmer Strasse checkpoint on the East/West border in Berlin were flung open. As the news spread and the two Berlins converged, the once formidable and infamous Berlin Wall fell. The West German Chancellor, Helmut Kohl, received the news while attending a conference in Poland and immediately rushed back to West Germany. The future of East Germany and its relationship to the West was not a given. Helmut Kohl envisioned a unified Germany and was determined to set the wheels in motion. The Chancellor laid the foundation for unification with the decisive Ten-Point Plan.¹ Kohl turned the plan into action and established a united independent German State by securing the international treaty on the Final Settlement with respect to Germany, commonly known as the Two Plus Four Treaty.

The end of WWII and the status of post-war Germany placed their fate in the hands of the allied powers. Germany remained an occupied territory. The United States, France, and England controlled sectors in the west while, the Soviet Union occupied the east. The fall of the communist government in the Russian sector opened the window for renegotiating the status of not only the eastern state but the country as a whole. To ensure the creation of a unified Germany, Helmut Kohl first secured adoption of the Ten-Point Plan domestically and gained critical support from the United States. Secondly, through the Ten-Point Plan, Kohl stabilized East Germany and established a working democratic government in the former communist state. Finally, to secure a new treaty, Kohl worked with each of the allied nations to overturn the WWII provisos and grant Germany a new status on the world stage. The plan for a Federated Germany was included in the Ten-Point Plan. Point five outlined a democratic process in which West Germany was prepared to create a Federal Government with the former East Germany. Professor Werner Weidenfeld, a German political scientist, in his book *Aussenpolitik fur die Deutsche Einheit (foreign policy for the German Unification)*, stated that “it turned unification rhetoric into an operative (or concrete) policy.”²

¹ The ten-point plan declared the intention of West Germany in the wake of the collapse of the East German government. Points one through four outlined assistance measures to be extended East Germany. Point five declared the goal of a federated and united Germany. Points six through eight confirmed Germany’s commitment to the European Community. Points nine and ten assured the World a commitment to peace. For further details a translation of the document can be found on the website “German History in Documents and Images” at <https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org>.

² Werner Weidenfeld, Peter Wagner und Elke Bruck, *Aussenpolitik fur die Deutsche Einheit* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt Stuttgart, 1998), 109

The Ten-Point Plan and its immediate implementation for unification were vital. This plan detailed both immediate and long-range goals of the West German government in navigating the fall of communist East Germany. It sent a clear message that West Germany would take the actions needed to stabilize East Germany. The plan addressed initial domestic concerns such as displaced persons and necessary economic and political support, along with the long-range plan of a United Germany. Internationally, it assured the European community and the world of Germany's commitment to peace. Writing the plan fell to Horst Teltschik, the foreign policy advisor, and his team.³ Within two weeks the draft was handed to Helmut Kohl.

Helmut Kohl chose the element of surprise and delivered the Ten-Point Plan to the German Parliament on November 28, 1989. The German Chancellor released the plan quickly and without forewarning. By moving quickly, Kohl set the tone domestically and internationally. Helmut Kohl was in charge domestically, and Germany was ready to be independent internationally. Kohl defended his secrecy in his memoir stating, "If I had presented the 10-point-plan to the coalition, or even a circle of closest advisors, they would have talked the points to death."⁴ Jeffrey Gedmin, senior fellow at Georgetown University, commented in his article for the *Washington Post* "that the German chancellor stunned the world with his 10-point plan for German Unification. His own foreign minister [Hans Dietrich Genscher] had been left in the dark."⁵ The German Parliament and the world were taken by surprise. The element of surprise had worked. Germany, specifically Helmut Kohl, was in charge of Germany's fate. Strategically, he would find a vital ally right away.

Helmut Kohl knew the importance of the German-American alliance. The United States had a critical say in the future of the Germanys. The White House received the transcript of the plan just before Kohl was to speak in the Bundestag session. The post-Cold War historian Mary Elise Sarotte comments in her book *1989* that, "According to Teltschick, the decision was the start of a pattern. He and Kohl could and should make necessary decisions on their own, but one person must always be informed: Bush."⁶ By the time the document had been translated, Chancellor Kohl had already presented the plan to the Bundestag. Despite this, President George H.W. Bush was receptive and positive on the future of the Germanys. Helmut Kohl recalled in his memoirs, "George Bush remarked that he had carefully read the ten-point plan and the details outlining

³ Horst Teltschick was a trusted political advisor to Kohl and part of his inner circle. Their political partnership began in the 1970's when Kohl was Prime Minister of Rheinland-Palantine and Teltschick was the leading advisor for the State Chancellery.

⁴ Kohl, Helmut, *Von Mauerfall zur Wiedervereinigung, Meine Erinnerungen* (Droemersch Verlaganstalt Th. Knaur Nachf. GmbH & Co. KG, München, 2014), Kindle ed. Loc.1422

⁵ Gedmin, Jeffrey, "Helmut Kohl Helped Save the West." *The Washington Post* (WP *Washingtonpost.com*, 2017.) <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2017/06/19/helmut-kohl-helped-save-the-west/>.

⁶ Sarotte, Mary Elise, *1989* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 73

the future for a united Germany, and he felt in agreement.”⁷ In an interview with Spiegel Magazine in September of 2009, former Secretary of State James Baker reflected on the element of surprise, “I would have preferred to have heard of the plan before it was announced, but we were not angry.”⁸ By securing the support of the United States first Kohl paved the way for success.

Domestically, the Ten-Point Plan was not wholeheartedly received in the Bundestag. Kohl notes, “Oskar LaFontaine, an SPD [Social Democrat Party] politician from Saarland, went so far to state that the ten-point-plan was a diplomatic failure.”⁹ Oskar LaFontaine’s opposition is also noted in the *Washington Post* article by Jeffrey Gedmin. Gedmin points out, “Oskar Lafontaine, leader of the opposition Social Democrats, railed against the notion.”¹⁰ Despite the SPD’s vocal opposition and withheld votes, the Ten-Point Plan passed on December 1, 1989. Kohl’s own party, the CDU (Christian Democrat Party), overwhelmingly supported the plan, overlooking their frustrations at the element of surprise. Kohl pushed the plan through the Bundestag setting a clear domestic course.

The Ten-Point Plan outlined the goal of unification, but a new international treaty was necessary to enact the plan. Here too, Kohl worked specifically and determinedly. The final treaty required an agreement between the two Germanys, the United States, Soviet Union, France, and England. Helmut Kohl cultivated a strong relationship with the United States securing support from the White House. Secretary Baker said of the Chancellor, “he gave us his word. We gave ours.”¹¹ Sarotte explains that Kohl won over President Bush “by giving him convincing descriptions of the problems on the ground and the solutions he wanted to apply.”¹² Other nations were not as convinced, and trust was far from their response. Helmut Kohl would work carefully to maneuver and dispel concerns. Kohl recalled that the British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, was emphatically opposed. Kohl summed up her opinion and quoted Thatcher’s comment, “I prefer two Germany’s to one, we have beaten the Germans twice and yet here they are again.”¹³ Mark Gilbert, historian and fellow of the Royal Historical Society, expressed more pragmatic concerns “The EC nations welcomed the fall of the Wall from the humanitarian point of view but feared that a

⁷ Kohl, *Von Mauerfall zur Wiedervereinigung*, loc 1589

⁸ Baker, James, interview by Gavor Steingart and Axel Frohn, *Without American Leadership there Would Have Been No Unification* (Speigel.de September 23,2009), <https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/james-baker-on-the-fall-of-the-wall-without-american-leadership-there-would-have-been-no-unification-a-650801.html>

⁹ Kohl, *Von Mauerfall zur Wiedervereinigung*, 1522

¹⁰ Gedmin “Helmut Kohl Helped Save the West”

¹¹ Baker, James, interview, *Without American Leadership there WouldHave Been No Unification*

¹² Sarotte, 1989, 79

¹³ Kohl, *Von Mauerfall zur Wiedervereinigung*, loc 250

united Germany would be less committed to European integration.”¹⁴ Despite Thatcher’s vocal opposition, hesitation from the European Community, and Russian reluctance, Kohl moved forward. Kohl methodically won each ally and East Germany to unification.

The Soviet Union and its leader Mikhail Gorbachev posed a complex diplomatic challenge. The Soviet Union was both an ally to the United States in matters of post-war Germany and an enemy in the current Cold War. Kohl needed to balance the egos of both nations carefully. Gorbachev and Kohl initially had friendly diplomatic relations, as noted by Kohl’s memoirs. Kohl recalled, “We were of one mind; we needed to forge a new German-Soviet Union relationship if the situation in Europe was to improve.”¹⁵ This warm exchange was a month before the Berlin Wall fell, and Gorbachev seemed in control of events in East Germany. By February 1990, all that had changed, and Gorbachev was concerned by the substantial shift of power to the West. While the European political landscape was shifting, Gorbachev also struggled with domestic issues. Of significant concern, the USSR was facing a series of food shortages. Seeing this as an opportunity, Sarotte states that “Kohl responded by approving a government subsidy for the sale of 220 million DM worth of food to the USSR.”¹⁶ This aide was a deliberate humanitarian gesture with political aims. As Kohl was cementing goodwill with Moscow, he worked on the next step: pushing for free elections in East Germany. This decisive action was aided by a series of events on January 15, 1990, and Kohl knew to act on them.

To bring East Germany to the table for treaty negotiations, it was essential to have a functioning government, preferably amiable to Kohl’s plans. The political climate was not secure, and Hans Modrow, the Communist Party leader in East Germany, attempted to revive the last gasps of the communist regime. Fatally, Modrow chose to revitalize the Stasi. In response, enraged East Germans demonstrated and stormed the former Stasi headquarters. As the western Allies wondered what Moscow’s reaction might be, Gorbachev was busy stalling. By the end of January 1990, Gorbachev’s only reaction was to suggest a six-party meeting; the Four Allied powers and two Germans. It became clear that Moscow would not interfere in East Germany to reinstate a communist regime. Modrow was forced to acquiesce to an earlier free election date of March 18, 1990. Kohl determined and made clear, according to Sarotte, “East Germans could not even maintain a functioning government and so he-not the four powers or anyone else-had to provide one as soon as possible.”¹⁷ Helmut Kohl was

¹⁴ Gilbert, Mark. *Cold War Europe: the Politics of a Contested Continent*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 275

¹⁵ Kohl, *Von Mauerfall zur Wiedervereinigung*, loc 342

¹⁶ Sarotte, 1989, 102

¹⁷ Sarotte, 1989, 99

successful in what would be East Germany's first and only free election as a separate state.

Helmut Kohl had two goals in the East German election. Kohl wrote, "the first and most important goal was that the SED [Socialist Party] losses the election, the second, that CDU [Christian Democrat Party] representatives win the elections."¹⁸ Kohl personally campaigned in East Germany, speaking to over a million people. Kohl's determination paid off, and he achieved both goals. The CDU had won; the SED was out. Tony Judt, a historian of European Studies, notes in *PostWar*, "The first act of the new majority in the GDR [German Democratic Republic] Volkskammer...led by Lothar deMaiziere, was to commit their country to Germany unity."¹⁹ Helmut Kohl had stabilized the government in the east with representatives of his party ready to work towards a unified Germany.

The next step was to shore up the East German economy. The collapse of the East German government reverberated on the financial market. The value of the East German Mark was rapidly declining, and a black market for goods and the West German Mark materialized. Helmut Kohl pushed forth a program of economic rescue that offered one West German Deutsch Mark for the much less valuable East German Ost-Mark. This decision was made unilaterally by Kohl, as Sarotte points out, "without consultation with central bankers."²⁰ The third point in the Ten-Point Plan offers extensive assistance of a "fundamental transformation in the political and economic system of the GDR [East Germany]."²¹ Making good on election promises, the exchange was implemented. Marcel Fratzscher, economist and University of Berlin professor, revisits this decision in his Wall Street Journal article *Helmut was Right*. Fratzscher wrote, "Kohl ignored his critics. His central economic insight was that reunification would be the cause, not the result of economic alignment...he has been proved right by history."²² Helmut Kohl explained, "I pushed for a July 1st start date for the exchange; my motive for choosing this date was that the GDR would start their summer vacations. I wanted the GDR citizens to have Deutsch Marks for their travels to Bavaria, Black Forest or Italy."²³ The two Germany's moved closer to unification. The question remained: how would Germany fit in the European and world geopolitical realm?

The prospect of unification challenged the political status quo. During the Cold War, the two Germanys stood as a military buffer zone. Allied troops stationed in West

¹⁸ Kohl, *Von Mauerfall zur Wiedervereinigung*, loc 2186

¹⁹ Judt, Tony. *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 638

²⁰ Sarotte, 1989,133

²¹ Riemer, Jeremiah, trans. "Helmut Kohl's Ten-Point Plan for German Unity." GDHI - German History in Documents and History. https://ghdi.ghidc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=223.

²² Marcel Fratzscher, "Helmut Kohl Was Right," *The Wall Street Journal* (Dow Jones & Company, June 27, 2017), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/helmut-kohl-was-right-1498592169>.

²³ Kohl, *Von Mauerfall zur Wiedervereinigung*, loc 3070

Germany and Soviet troops in East Germany kept the balance of power. Mark Gilbert noted the concerns of other nations at the time, "Would a united Germany be Neutral? Or remain in NATO? Or even be a member in both?"²⁴ Kohl addressed these concerns in the tenth point of the plan. "A need for a comprehensive policy towards a condition of peace."²⁵ Kohl declared that "leaving NATO can never be the price for unification."²⁶ Kohl's intent was quite clear. Moreover, the two-plus-four treaty negotiations would create the structure for German sovereignty.

Having stabilized East Germany, Helmut Kohl knew the next step was push for a unified German State. This required a renegotiation of Germany's post-war status. Christiane Lemke and Helga Welsh noted in *Germany Today*, "on the international level German Unity required the consent of the Allied Powers."²⁷ The need for American support was evident. Helmut Kohl acknowledged "The Americans had in the German unification process a leading role, knowing that I worked towards that end, the Americans would be a deciding factor in the Two-plus-Four negotiations."²⁸ Kohl, while reflecting on his trip to Camp David in February 1990, acknowledged that a close bond between the nations was forged. President Bush was clear on the American position: the future of Germany would not be masterminded by the Soviet Union. Even as the cold war fizzled out Germany was caught in the cross hairs between Washington and Moscow. Moscow indicated that a unified Germany in the NATO alliance was not an option, and Washington indicated that a unified Germany outside of NATO would not exist.

Helmut Kohl met with Gorbachev to gain final support for a unified Germany. Winning over Gorbachev was a matter of timing and finances. Regarding a meeting in February of 1990, Helmut Kohl claimed that the trip was an unmitigated success. Kohl claimed, "we had Gorbachev's approval to move forward with the 2 + 4 talks ... [and] the green light to negotiate all aspects of reunification internally."²⁹ This was either naively optimistic or shrewdly political positioning of events. The matter of the NATO alliance and Germany had not been settled in that February meeting. Sarotte states of this meeting that although "he [Kohl] would come to agree with the Bush position; only full NATO membership for a united Germany would be acceptable... this was not identical to the language he had used with Gorbachev on February 10."³⁰ In a follow up meeting with Gorbachev on July 14, 1990, Kohl stressed the need for final agreement

²⁴ Gilbert, *Post War*, 271

²⁵ Reimer, "Helmut Kohls Ten-Point Plan"

²⁶ Kohl, *Von Mauerfall zur Wiedervereinigung*, loc 2270

²⁷ Christiane Lemke and Helga A. Welsh, *Germany Today Politics and Policies in a Changing World* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 10

²⁸ Kohl, *Von Mauerfall zur Wiedervereinigung*, loc 2682

²⁹ Kohl, *Von Mauerfall zur Wiedervereinigung*, loc 2512

³⁰ Sarotte, 1989, 114

and settlement on the status of Germany. Kohl strategically reminded Gorbachev of the financial aid West Germany had previously extended to the USSR. Judt noted, "As the West German Chancellor had foreseen, the USSR was open to financial persuasion."³¹ Gorbachev relented only with stipulations, current borders would stay, and Germany would not have their own atomic, chemical, or biological weapons. The first demand had already been met; the second Kohl had addressed in his ninth point in his plan. The next statement from Gorbachev was vital. Sarotte noted in her book, "with studied casualness, Gorbachev slipped in what sounded like the long hoped-for concession."³² Gorbachev announced that Soviet troops would stay only for a transitional period. He continued that a unified Germany could be in NATO. Kohl, keen to secure this development, called an unscheduled press conference. Sarotte remarks on this strategy "once again using his old and proven method of publicizing an agreement as soon as it was reached to legitimate it, solidify it, and make it difficult to reverse."³³ With the U.S. firmly in the reunification camp and Gorbachev headed in the direction of a deal, two of the four Allied Powers were on board.

Helmut Kohl dealt with opposition from Francois Mitterrand, President of France, and Margaret Thatcher, Prime Minister of England. In his memoirs he titled the sixth chapter "Stallers and Opponents on the Way to Unification - Thatcher, Mitterrand and Andreotti and others."³⁴ Both countries had equal say in the fate of Germany, and neither embraced the concept of a unified, independent Germany.

Francois Mitterrand was extremely wary, and his trust of a German Republic was skeptical. This is to be almost expected since he spent a year during WWII as a prisoner of war in a German Stalag before escaping on his third attempt. Tony Judt points out that Mitterrand was against unity "so far as to visit the GDR in December 1989 in a show of support for its sovereignty."³⁵ Mitterrand voiced his concerns as of France's leader and as the head of the European Commission. Sarotte noted in her book, "for German unification to be acceptable...it had to take place in a way that was agreeable to both France and the EC."³⁶ This concern frustrated Kohl – he had outlined in the sixth point of the Ten-Point Plan. Germany planned to remain firmly committed to the European Union. Kohl met with Mitterrand in January of 1990 to address the French president's concerns. The talks, according to Kohl, started with a palpable feeling of mistrust. However, by the end, Helmut Kohl writes, "as I flew back, I had the feeling I had convinced Mitterrand ...The French mistrust seemed to be diminished by

³¹ Judt, *Postwar*, 642

³² Sarotte, *1989*, 180

³³ Sarotte, *1989*, 181

³⁴ Kohl, *Von Mauerfall zur Wiedervereinigung*, loc 841

³⁵ Judt, *Postwar*, 640

³⁶ Sarotte, *1989*, 56

my open and clear conversation.”³⁷ Judt explained, “Kohl even concurred in the coming months over a range of minor concessions to reward Paris for its forbearance.”³⁸ Kohl’s concessions worked. By agreeing to a stronger centralized European banking system and currency, Mitterrand conceded to unification. By February 1990, Kohl referred to Mitterrand as my friend. This concession laid the groundwork for the Maastricht Treaty of 1992, which is the basis of the current European Union.

The most outspoken critic of German Reunification was Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Columnist Carsten Volkery noted in his article “The Germans are Back” in *Der Spiegel*, the prime minister “did not share Mitterrand’s optimism that Germans could be tamed by being incorporated into the European institutions.”³⁹ Kohl was well aware of Thatcher’s disapproval, but he also knew she was not supported in this opinion internationally or even in her own government. The British Foreign Minister Douglas Hurd indicated as much in a speech given in Bonn supporting the right of German self-determination. Kohl maneuvered correctly, ignoring the Prime Minister’s verbal assaults, and met with Hurd. Sarotte wrote that “Usually a foreign minister and a head of government meeting would be a breach of protocol...each was willing to compensate.”⁴⁰ Volkery noted that letters and memos released from April 1989 and November 1990 showed “only one person had serious doubt about the change: Margaret Thatcher.”⁴¹ Internationally, Thatcher had been unable to persuade the U.S., France, or the Soviet Union to stop the unification of the two Germanys. England acquiesced to a unified Germany, reaffirming the stipulations laid out by France for a strengthened European Community to check to German power.

Helmut Kohl was the mastermind behind the creation of a unified Germany. Tony Judt claims, “Credit for German re-unification...must go in the first instance to Helmut Kohl.”⁴² Kohl had initiated the ten-point-plan. He stepped ahead of the events, identified the challenges, and established solutions. He secured US support from the onset. He acted quickly to promote a free East German election avoiding a dangerous power vacuum. Kohl found the Soviet Union’s weak spot and financed their consent. With Mitterrand, Kohl not only turned a foe into a friend but together, they sowed the seeds of the EU and the EURO. Margaret Thatcher was won over with time and a concession to strengthen the European Community and its oversight. Certainly, the help of the US cannot be overlooked. Nor is it fair to discount Gorbachev’s contribution.

³⁷ Kohl, *Von Mauerfall zur Wiedervereinigung*, loc. 2084

³⁸ Judt, *Postwar*, 640

³⁹ Carsten Volkery, “The Iron Lady's Views on German Reunification: 'The Germans Are Back!',” *DER SPIEGEL* (*DER SPIEGEL*, September 11, 2009), <https://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/the-iron-lady-s-views-on-german-reunification-the-germans-are-back-a-648364.html>.

⁴⁰ Sarotte, *1989*, 100

⁴¹ Volkery, “The Iron Lady’s Views”

⁴² Judt, *Postwar*, 638

With political savvy and a bit of luck, Kohl secured his vision of a sovereign, united Germany in less than a year. The final treaty was signed in Moscow on September 12th. The occupied status of Germany expired at midnight on October 2, 1990. The peace treaty to end the second World War in Germany had finally been signed.