

Great Britain under Margaret Thatcher and German Unification

Susanne Zalewski, University of Winnipeg

During the process of German unification 1989/1990, several different opinions about what should benefit Germany and the Western world were held by the different politicians in Western Europe. Of special interest was and is the policy of the British Government under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Nearly half a century ago, the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and after the election in summer 1945 Clement Attlee from the Labor Party, were one of the “big three” who negotiated with Josef Stalin and Franklin D. Roosevelt and later Harry Truman the future of a divided Germany and of Europe. Great Britain became one of the occupation powers in Germany and one of the four members of the Allied Control Council in Berlin until re-unification in 1990. However, unlike France, the United Kingdom had no special friendship with West Germany, as France did through the “Élysée Treaty.”

The main question of this article is: did Margaret Thatcher support German Re-Unification or did she hinder the process of unifying Germany? There is another question: was the experience of Nazi-Germany and the Second World War still present in the policy of Margaret Thatcher, especially the failure of Chamberlain’s “appeasement policy” in Munich 1938?

Support or Strict Refusal of German Re-Unification?

Sir Charles Powell, the main advisor of Margaret Thatcher in external affairs, believed that Britain’s policies towards German reunification was more productive than is generally believed:

I think it’s really rather absurd to say that the British were in any ways a brake on ending the Cold War. I would say the two most influential politicians in the West in bringing about the end of the Cold War were Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. They were the ones who had the vision to make NATO strong again, to modernise its weapons, to place an unbreakable strain on the Soviet system and bring it to the point of collapse. And it was really their strength which was really the heart of the NATO alliance and it was that which brought about the end of the Cold War – not the concessions which other Europeans were prepared to offer. So I see Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher as the principal forces

bringing about the end of the Cold War – not in any way a brake on that process.¹

That means that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the merit of Thatcher's and Reagan's policy of confrontation and the main precondition of German unification. The interviewer asked:

AvP: I think that it's concerning the ending of Cold War, but is it the same concerning the unification of Germany?

Powell: The unification of Germany is and always was a prime ambition of NATO, from the very earliest days it was clear that our aim in the West was to bring about German reunification. Of course, the circumstances under which it became a possibility were a surprise. None of us expected the sudden collapse of the East German regime – the sudden demolition of the Berlin Wall. And therefore, when the moment of reunification started to approach, people had very different views within NATO of how fast we should progress towards that. And Britain, I absolutely agree, wanted to see a rather slower and more gradual process towards reunification than the full-scale gallop which Chancellor Kohl and his friends in Germany were leading.

AvP: But I think there were reasons for this tempo.

Powell: You see many European politicians were concerned, first of all, that too rapid progress towards German reunification would be highly destabilising for President Gorbachev in the Soviet Union. After all, he was our main hope of a more liberalising, a more humane system in the Soviet Union. We knew there were forces ranged against him in the Soviet Union more conservative, hard-line forces who did not approve of his domestic policies, let alone his foreign policy and his willingness to allow East European countries to break free of the Soviet yoke. We did not want to do anything in Germany which would put Gorbachev at risk, and it is quite clear - it was quite clear to us then that Gorbachev feared the consequences of too rapid a move towards German reunification. He urged us not to let the process go too far, too fast. And that view was shared strongly by Margaret Thatcher, but not only by her. President Mitterrand, you know, was just as strong in his concerns about the pace of German reunification. Let me say that again: Not about the goal of German reunification, which we all shared, but the pace of it.²

¹ Sir Charles Powell, interview by Alexander von Plato, London, 27 September 1999.

² *Ibid.*

Indeed, many of the Western powers, especially the British, were worried by the speed in which the process took place. Thatcher in particular was concerned that reunification might seriously undermine Gorbachev's position within the Soviet Union. Though the fall of the Berlin wall came as a surprise to both Margaret Thatcher and her government, Thatcher made it clear that she was pleased that the wall had come down. Thatcher felt as though the wall was "an abomination, an indisputable proof that communism was ultimately a system of slavery imposed by imprisoning whole populations."³ Thatcher stressed that the unification should have been a gradual and carefully regulated process, which should have taken place about a decade after the actual event took place. The delay would have allowed the Western powers to take more time to observe what the consequences would have been for the world.⁴ Thatcher declared often that once the two Germany states were united, it would have been near to impossible for them to be separated once again.

However, could this argument be a cover for a fundamental refusal of a unified Germany? In addition: Wasn't it a main goal of Thatcher's and Reagan's policy to modernise NATO's weapons, which they thought would place an intolerable economic burden on the Soviet Union, directed towards destroying the USSR?

Besides that, there were a lot of diplomats and politicians who denied the thesis that the collapse of the Soviet imperium was the result of external pressure, for instance, the Canadian diplomats Lavertu and Fowler.⁵ And Anatoli S. Cernaev, the main advisor denied that Gorbachev was in a real danger of a coup d'Etat of his inner political enemies in 1989 and 1990.⁶ Gorbachev himself confirmed this statement.⁷

Jacques Attali, a French politician and advisor of President Mitterrand, was among those who argued that Thatcher and her government opposed unification.⁸ He did not see the same aims in the British and the French policy concerning Germany in 1989/1990.⁹ Thatcher, according to Attali, was fearful that German re-unification could change the balance between continental Europe

³ Margaret Thatcher, *Statecraft* (NY: HarperCollins, 2002), 2.

⁴ Konrad H. Jarausch, *The Rush to German Unity* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1994), 132.

⁵ Gaetan Lavertu, Interviewed by Alexander von Plato, Stephen Spence, and Hayley Caldwell, Ottawa, January 22, 2013; Robert Fowler, Interviewed by Alexander von Plato, Winnipeg and Ottawa via Skype, March 18, 2013.

⁶ Alexander von Plato, *Die Vereinigung Deutschlands – ein weltpolitisches Machtspiel*, (Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2003), 180, 186, and (in a very sharp form) 203.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 200.

⁸ Jacques Attali, Interviewed by Hans-Christoph Blumenberg, November 1999.

⁹ See the essay by Alexander von Plato and Amanda Kotowicz in this special issue, *France under President Mitterrand and German Unification*.

and Great Britain and would strengthen Germany in a way that could be dangerous for its neighbours.¹⁰

Nevertheless Mitterrand and Thatcher seemed sometimes to be in the same position against German unity. It is the same Attali who conveyed the following story from the European summit in Strasbourg in December 1989:

Attali: Mrs. Thatcher was obsessed at the idea that Germany would like to reorganise the Third Reich territory. And then at the summit she took two maps, one of the existing Germany and one of the Germany of '39, and she said very vehemently 'Germany would like to come back to this borders.' But this summit was the follow-up of another summit where Mrs. Thatcher was mad. It was a month before, there was a summit convene of the last minute at the Elysee to prepare the Strasbourg Summit, it was in November. And Mrs. Thatcher became mad when the chancellor explains that the German Reunification was already agreed by a N.A.T.O. decision of '71. Mrs. Thatcher burst by saying 'well, but when we said that we knew it was impossible!' and the chancellor said 'yeah, you just said it.' And then, I think, at that moment everything were broken between them. And she always was very reluctant, very distressful. Francois Mitterrand was in between. He never trusted Mrs. Thatcher, he did not agree with her, but he wanted to get something out of German Reunification.

In Attali's eyes Margaret Thatcher pretended only to support Germany's unification. Only in March 1990 did she agree to re-unification when it became clear that the unified Germany will be in NATO.

Re-unification and the Nazi Past

As we saw already, the possibility of a united Germany rekindled memories of previous German aggressions in many politicians' minds. Thus, a fundamental precondition to reunification was alleviating such fears, and convincing them that a unified Germany would not behave in an aggressive or imperialist manner, as the previous "Second" and "Third Reich" had done. With memories of Germany's terror during both World Wars still fresh in the minds of the Western powers, all discussions on unification were spoken in terms of Germany's sorted and troubled past. Unification was also examined in terms of how it might look for the future of not only the unified Germany, but also the European and North American

¹⁰ von Plato, 136, 146. In opposition to the policy of Margret Thatcher, the Labour Party and especially its leader Neil Kinnock supported the re-unification of Germany. *Ibid.*, 210.

powers.¹¹ The British government and some of its Western allies did not want to allow Germany to gain too much political and military strength, so as to ensure that Germany could not dominate Europe, which they feared would only threaten the peace and stability of the continent. As such, a reunified Germany needed to be integrated into at least one of the existing security and economic architectures to assure Western leaders, particularly Thatcher, that German foreign policy could be at least partially regulated. For Bush and Thatcher it was NATO, for Mitterrand it was a new security system or CSCE and the European Union.

The main considerations which prevented the British from supporting the reunification of Germany were the memories of two world wars fought against Imperial and Nazi Germany. The legacy of the failure of the Treaty of Versailles, in which Britain and France failed to weaken Germany sufficiently after the First World War, was remembered acutely. Indeed, the same treaty created such resentment inside Germany that it created the circumstances in which Hitler and the Nazis were able to come to power. The Nazis in turn, were to lead Germany into a more destructive and bloody World War only twenty years after the Treaty of Versailles. The trauma of the Nazi occupation of Europe during the Second World War was what some Western powers, including Britain, used to justify the continuation of a divided Germany.¹² These Western powers also believed that the horrific crimes committed by the German government under Hitler's rule, especially the murder of European Jews and the concentration camp system, would justify the continued separation.¹³ Thatcher, in particular, seemed to fear a resurgence of German imperialist ambitions if the country regained its former military and economic dominance of the continent. Not all of the Western powers shared Thatcher's fears. Amongst the most prominent supporters of German reunification were George Bush Sr.,¹⁴ Brian Mulroney, Francois Mitterrand, and Felipe Gonzalez who looked to the economic and political stability of West Germany as better indicators of how a reunified Germany would act in Europe.

Thatcher's government believed that there were several steps that needed to take place before the unification of Germany could take place. First, Thatcher believed that a democratic government would have to be firmly established in Eastern Germany, a position firmly supported by one of her advisors Sir Charles Powell.¹⁵ Elections, followed by a period of gradual democratization, would reduce the differences between the two German republics, and allow for a

¹¹ Jarausch, 171.

¹² *Ibid.*, 180.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ George Bush said in an interview with Alexander von Plato in 1999, that the Germans had earned their unity by their democratic development during the post-war period. *Ibid.*, 220.

¹⁵ Sir Charles Powell interview.

smoother transition to reunification. This opinion was shared by nearly all of the West German parties, and even of Chancellor Kohl himself.

Margaret Thatcher was among the politicians who were worried about what a unified Germany would mean for the rest of Europe, especially its neighbours in the Baltic.¹⁶ This concern for the Baltic States was one of reasons which made Thatcher desire a slower path to reunification. As Lord Thomas (a political advisor of the British government of that time), has argued, Britain's foreign policy has traditionally been rooted in the preservation in the balance of power in Europe. A reunified Germany thus posed a potential threat to Britain's desire for equilibrium on the continent.¹⁷ This concern was evident when Thatcher met with the current President George Bush, Sr. on November 13, 1989. Thatcher told Bush that this was not the right time for unification for the two Germanys.¹⁸ When it became evident that NATO was becoming a stronger force, and that Germany would not be allowed to become a neutral nation, but would be required to become a member of NATO, Thatcher expressed that her fears for a unified Germany had lessened. With her worries of a unified Germany reassured, Thatcher began to drop her previous opposition to the idea of Germany reunification.¹⁹

Much like the British, the French, led by President Mitterrand was also skeptical about the reunification of Germany. Though both countries appear to have a similar view on unification, there were also distinct differences between them. Both countries strongly feared what might happen if Germany reunified and became the dominant power in Europe, which was one of the reasons that both Mitterrand and Thatcher wished for a more gradual reunification. Lord Thomas thought that in comparison to Thatcher, Mitterrand was much more of a profound thinker when it came to French-German relations, that Mitterrand's thoughts were more balanced.²⁰ France feared that if Germany became too powerful then France would lose its previous dominance over European affairs.²¹ Both nations wished to see a continuation of a balance of power in Europe, and were opposed to German economic and political hegemony.

Politicians such as Sir Charles Powell and Lord Thomas argue that they believed Margaret Thatcher's fear of a strongly unified Germany was rooted deep in her childhood. Lord Thomas and Sir Charles Powell both have stated that they believed that Thatcher's childhood during the period leading up to the Second

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 180.

¹⁷ Lord Thomas, interview by Hans-Christoph Blumenberg, 1999.

¹⁸ Charles S. Maier, *Dissolution: The Crisis of Communism and the End of East Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 249.

¹⁹ Jarausch, 132.

²⁰ Lord Thomas interview.

²¹ Sir Charles Powell interview.

World War, and the war itself played a role in her future idea of Germany.²² Born in 1925, Thatcher grew up during the time of the Nazi government in Germany. During her childhood, and teenage years during the Second World War, Germany was the great enemy of Britain, and therefore she had developed a fear that a unified Germany was an inherent threat to the peace of Europe. Some believed that when thinking of a unified Germany, subconsciously there would be a fear that this new Germany would be able to become geographically large, and gain enough strength that it could become a dominating power in Europe. Nevertheless, during her time as Prime Minister Thatcher never publically stated any connection between a unified Germany and that of the Nazi era. Thatcher acknowledged and respected the numerous changes and achievements of West Germany in the post-war years.

How influential the Nazi past in Thatcher's policy was is evident in the following story which was reported by her minister Alan Clark. It was a scene with Thatcher at her country estate, Chequers, on 28 January 1990:

Clark thought that there was too much talk of Munich in 1938. It was necessary to support the reunification politics of Kohl. "Now the Germans will give something for it. It's coming anyway." Charles Powell would support him with the same idea that later nothing more could be gotten. Now Kohl would, for example, support the expansion of NATO. Clark: no one knows how it would be later.
 Thatcher: (with "flashing eyes"²³): "That means retreating before Kohl's grand power ambitions. And I will never do that."
 Clark (laughing): "You are wrong, completely wrong."
 Thatcher: "I'm not an appeaser."²⁴

Though Thatcher saw the changes in Germany in the post-war era, she compared the unification of Germany in 1989 managed by Kohl with the situation in Munich managed by Hitler one year before World War II. Lord Thomas still felt she had lingering reservations that Germans were inclined to be authoritarian.²⁵ Lord Thomas' thoughts would be confirmed while Thatcher was in a meeting with Western politicians where she would assert her thoughts on German national character as being that of "anxiety, aggressiveness, arrogance, ruthlessness, complacency, with an inferiority complex and sentimentality."²⁶ Even with Britain's knowledge of these changes and achievements, there continued to be a

²² *Ibid.*; Lord Thomas interview.

²³ Alan Clark, *Diaries* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson Ltd., 1994).

²⁴ Chamberlain was referred to as an appeaser after 1938.

²⁵ Lord Thomas interview.

²⁶ Jarausch, 181.

belief that unifying Germany would upset the stability that Western Europe was enjoying. The fear of a resurgent Germany would have been against not only Britain's, but also France's historical belief in not allowing a dominating power in Europe.

The fear of a strong Germany was not limited to Thatcher; the citizens of England had to live through two major wars where Germany was their principle enemy. Many British men had fought against the Germans in horrific battles during both wars. Those who were not on the front lines witnessed the effects of war at home. The memories of the numerous bombings in England that took place by the hands of the German Air force were not so distant that the English people had yet forgotten. With tragic memories of what life was like during war times, English citizens were very skeptical of whether the concept of a strong and united Germany prevented a legitimate threat for the future. However, certain polls have showed that this presentation of the attitude of the British people is not confirmed by inquiries in early 1990: 45% supported German unification (Soviet Union: 60%, USA 61%, France 61%), 30% against it (Soviet Union 24%, USA 13%, France 15%), neither...nor: 19%, no statement: 6% (Soviet Union 19%, USA 17%, France 5%).²⁷

George Bush wanted to change this post-war order and extend the Western influence to the East and saw the West German government under Kohl as partner in leadership – the former role of Great Britain; Mitterrand wanted to found a stronger Europe, together with West Germany (and at the end together with a united Germany). Thatcher and her government did not want to make any rash political decisions that could have potentially upset the equilibrium in central Europe. The British government viewed what has happening in Bonn with caution, and their perceived rush towards unification was seen as suspicious. The group of nations commonly known as the 'Big Four' (Britain, United States, Soviet Union and France), the victors and treaty powers of the Second World War, maintained certain rights in Germany that had to first be negotiated before reunification could take place. This group of nations wanted the ability to influence the future of the unification; however the Big Four understood that to influence the unification process; they would have to first allow the unification to take place. The Big Four understood that this process was inevitable.²⁸

Thatcher and her government agreed with many of the points of the American government's stance on the issues of reunification. There was four main points to the American position: both sides had to be determined to establish the unification, the process should be slow as to not bring instability to Europe, Germany was to become a member of NATO and could not take a neutral

²⁷ Institut für Soziologie der sowjetischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, quoted by Gerhart Maier, *Die Wende in der DDR* (Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung 1990), 100.

²⁸ Jarausch, 162-3.

position, and finally that all existing borders would have to be confirmed and recognised by the German state. The Americans concurred with the British as to where the borders of Germany lay, however the greatest problem was to have the German leaders recognize where the German/Polish border was established. Chancellor Kohl was very reluctant to re-affirm where Germany's borders were before Germany was united, though it was sometimes accepted by Germany in the treaties with Poland and the Soviet Union in the beginning of the 1970s. Kohl's reluctance caused a great worry among the Western powers, especially within Germany itself.²⁹ The elected GDR-parliament decided a guarantee the Polish-German border in summer 1990.³⁰

Before unification could take place the Western powers demanded that Germany accept the borders that were established following World War II. The specific border that would cause an issue when it came to unification was the Oder-Neisse border between Germany and Poland. The dispute of where this border laid would also grow to be a condition of Germany's membership to NATO.³¹ The Polish government, along with the British, was pushing for Chancellor Kohl to recognize this border, before anyone would approve German reunification. Chancellor Kohl however continued to procrastinate to resolve the issue. Kohl knew that the allies were all pushing for a formal acknowledgement of this border, and that they would not allow the unification to take place until Poland's border was firmly established in the eyes of the German government. Finally, Germany promised to affirm the borders with Poland. This was not completely satisfactory to Poland, though it would appease the Western powers, and allowed the German state to continue on their journey towards unification.³²

According to Sir Charles Powell, Margaret Thatcher to a certain extent took into consideration the effects a unified Germany would have on the Soviet Union. Western European powers feared that with too rapid of a reunification there would weaken Gorbachev's political support in the Soviet Union. Sir Charles Powell claimed that of all the western leaders, Thatcher enjoyed the closest political relationship with Gorbachev. After her first meeting with Gorbachev, Thatcher was said to have immediately seen him as someone who very different from this processors in the Soviet government. Thatcher did not wish to see any instability creep into the Soviet Union and cause problems for Gorbachev and his government. The West saw Gorbachev as their best chance for seeing a more liberalizing and a more humane system of government put in place in the Soviet Union.³³ It can be added that the British and the U.S. government

²⁹ Sir Charles Powell interview; von Plato, 362.

³⁰ von Plato, 362.

³¹ Jarausch, 164.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Sir Charles Powell interview.

hoped to extend the Western influence to the East – against the interests of the Soviet Union and against Gorbachev.

Even with the numerous changes, and improvements that were taking place in the separate Germanys following the Second World War, a threat of a strong Germany was not something that would quickly disappear in the eyes of the British population, or their government. Even after the Germanys were united, the British Secretary for Industry, Nicholas Ridley criticized the idea of the creation of one universal European monetary policy. Ridley believed in the thinking that a single monetary policy was a plot by the Germans, which would have eventually seen them trying to take control of Europe, and threatening the stability and peace that was continuing to be enjoyed.³⁴ However, this single monetary policy was an invention of Mitterrand, and Kohl agreed though he saw it as not of German interest.³⁵

During a phone conversation with President Bush, Thatcher clearly laid out her thoughts on what the two countries would establish as their plan for the future of the two Germanys. Thatcher would focus on very concentrated topics like the recurring border issue. She felt as though her government should focus on having Germany confirm where the borders would be firmly recognized by all European nations. Thatcher wished to accommodate Gorbachev's wishes and to ease the Soviet Union's security concerns. Margaret Thatcher once again conveyed to President Bush that she believed that talks about German unification were too early, and that they should take more time to establish what a unified Germany would mean to the Western World.³⁶

Thatcher's personal thoughts on Europe and her government's idea of European community and togetherness is a vast contradiction to what others might have believed. Some thought that it was Margaret Thatcher's attitude towards Europe that was the main reason for her overthrow in the government. With Germany united, it became very clear that Thatcher developed an increasing hostility toward Europe, and the next steps in European integration. With this evident to her cabinet, they refused to back her in a second round of leadership elections and she resigned from her position of Prime Minister allowing for a new phase of British government to begin with new and changing relations with Europe.

Condoleezza Rice has argued that Britain had come out the Cold War, along with France, as secondary players and that the answer to the German question lay with the United States, the Soviet Union, and the two Germanys. The British came out of the Second World War weaker in areas of politics, economics,

³⁴ Jarausch, 180.

³⁵ See the essay by Alexander von Plato and Amanda Kotowicz in this special issue, *France under President Mitterrand and German Unification*.

³⁶ Jarausch, 115.

and military defenses; therefore they were not as large a player in the reunification as they may have established, and that the British might have observed the unification process with less input than what the Americans, Soviets, and Germans may have had.³⁷

Sir Charles Powell admitted during the interview with him that the British policy towards Germany's re-unification was a failure:

Look, let's be absolutely clear. Our policy of trying to slow down German reunification, to give priority to establishing democracy in East Germany and to looking after Gorbachev, was a failure. Our policy failed, there's no hesitation in admitting that. Margaret Thatcher admits it in her memoirs. She still believes she was right to try, but it didn't work. Events carried us along too fast.

But at the end of the interview he wanted to correct a little bit:

I've said to you that Britain's aim of slowing down German reunification was a failure, our policy did not succeed. With all the benefits of hindsight, I still think it was an honourable policy and one which offered certain advantages. It offered the best prospect of preserving Mr. Gorbachev. It offered the best prospect of establishing democracy thoroughly in East Germany. And one sees even now, how much support the Communist Party in East Germany, or its successor, continues to attract in Land elections – it is still a significant force. Perhaps that could have been avoided.

This ambiguity explains to a certain extent the British problems with Germany's unification. Sometimes there seemed to be a lack of (undemocratic) understanding in the wishes of the people. It always seems in these British positions that the German government pushed the people to the speed of the development, but the Kohl government was driven by the people as well.³⁸

³⁷ Philip Zelikow and Condoleezza Rice, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed: A Study in Statecraft* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 317-319.

³⁸ There are some very harsh judgments of the British politics. For instance, Nikolai Portugalov, a member of the international committee of the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party, said once in an interview with Alexander von Plato: "The British policy towards Germany was shaming, really shaming." Nikolai Portugalov, interview by Alexander von Plato, Lüdenscheid, 1 November 1999.