

Bertelsmann Stiftung (ed.)

FREEDOM  
EQUALITY  
SOLIDARITY

## **Freedom, Equality, Solidarity**

Thoughts on Europe's Future – from  
Germany, France and Poland

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# Freedom, Equality, Solidarity

Thoughts on Europe's Future – from  
Germany, France and Poland

With contributions by

*Marianne Birthler*

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*Daniel Cohn-Bendit*

*Heiner Geißler*

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*Dilek Güngör*

*Martin Hirsch*

*Adam Krzemiński*

*Jacek Kucharczyk*

*Adam Michnik*

*Aleksandra Niżyńska*

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# Introduction

JOACHIM FRITZ-VANNAHME AND ARMANDO GARCÍA SCHMIDT

The idea for this book emerged from the depths of a crisis that posed unprecedented challenges to the European Union, leaving many in Europe with serious doubts about the Union and its future. The following essays and conversations address the guiding principles of modern Europe – freedom, equality and solidarity – from French, Polish and German viewpoints. In so doing, they represent a reflective moment in which each author reconsiders his or her country, in the midst of Europe, with a critical eye to the past and recalibrated expectations for the future.

As trust dissipates and fears proliferate during this era of bank, debt and state crises, there is urgent need for reflection on many things: Why is there a European Union? Why do 27 member states and a half billion people cultivate, day by day, a culture of contentious debate as an integral feature of peaceful coexistence? What is it that holds the Union together at its core? A common budget of a mere one percent of its total GDP? A handful of common institutions, most of which are often referred to simply as “Brussels”? A single market featuring widely applicable rules and freedom of movement for goods, people, capital and services?

These things alone will not hold the EU together. It is no accident that Article 2 of the Treaty of Lisbon begins with a reference to the values upon which the Union is founded: “respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights.” The values identified here are key to pluralism, tolerance, solidarity and gender equality. There is much talk of a “European community of values.” But what, exactly, does it mean or entail? In this publication, German, Polish and French nationals have come together as Europeans with their respective

history, culture and tradition in hand. What divides them? How are they different? What unites them when it comes to concepts such as freedom, equality and solidarity?

The illustrious principles of freedom, equality and solidarity have undergone transformations in each of these countries. In some, this has been a slow process spanning a century; in others, like Poland, the change came with breathtaking speed, spanning only two to three decades. But it is more than history that connects these principles; they are connected as well by the network of relations that the contributors here underscore, often in surprising ways. “Freedom and equality” may have been the banner theme under which Enlightenment and revolutionary thinkers rallied in the 18th century, but without solidarity, freedom can devolve into the selfish pursuit of singular interests, and equality loses the lustre of diversity. Solidarity is therefore also addressed in the pages that follow.

In selecting our contributors, we paid no attention to age, profession, political party or religious background. We were simply interested in capturing what these individuals have to say, each of whom have addressed the broad terrain of these principles in their native Germany, Poland or France either by way of a public speech, a publication or their personal life story. Our only criteria was that each principle be considered from a German, Polish and French perspective. The points of view offered were left entirely up to the contributors.

The intellectual pursuits of the contributors are mirrored in the eyes of three photographers who sought to capture images of freedom, equality and solidarity in everyday life in each country. The only explicit connection between text and image are these three principles. Thus, the photographs are not intended to visualize the texts; they represent instead three additional approaches to “reading” the principles of freedom, equality and solidarity by other means.

The book demonstrates that the ideas of freedom, equality and solidarity continue to capture the avid attention of Europeans. But for those who might think these principles are safe and secure within the European Union, the contributors point to sobering developments: inequalities within and between the member states are growing; solidarity as a task of the Union

has been battered by arguments over debt servicing and austerity measures; and the freedoms suffering restrictions in neighbor states to the south and east are under (sometimes open) fire in member states, as well. Given this state of affairs, we believe this book and its contributions hold particular urgency. The principles of freedom, equality and solidarity cannot be taken for granted within the European Union – ensuring their viability requires constant attention.





**FREEDOM**

# Western Freedom – Eastern Freedom? Toward a Common Culture of Memory

MARIANNE BIRTHLER

“The Englishman loves liberty as his lawful wife, and if he does not treat her with remarkable tenderness, he is still ready in case of need to defend her like a man, and woe to the red-coated rascal who forces his way to her bedroom – let him do so as a gallant or as a catchpoll. The Frenchman loves liberty as his bride. He burns for her, he is aflame, he casts himself at her feet with the most extravagant protestations, he will fight for her to the death, he commits for her sake a thousand follies. The German loves liberty as though she were his old grandmother.”

What Heinrich Heine satirized in the 19th century appears true to this day: While many Germans certainly prize their freedom, it hardly tops their hierarchy of values. Indeed, quite a few Germans view freedom with suspicion, equating it with selfishness and free-market radicalism. The risks and burdens of an open society are mounted as arguments against the principle of liberty. Self-will, responsibility and a liberal attitude toward life have difficulty competing with the enticements of a protective and custodial social order.

For three generations, most Germans have lived in a free country whose democratic institutions, structures and practices are regarded as stable and exemplary. This stability is underpinned by the value that the great majority of the citizens of the former West Germany place on liberty and democracy – and by the fact that their experience of freedom in the past six decades was consistently linked to rising prosperity, economic power and internal as well as external security.

## **West Europe's core liberal values**

Just a few years after the end of the horrors that Germany's National Socialists unleashed upon Europe and the world, the free nations reached out to reconcile with Germany – an essential precondition to the integration of the Federal Republic into the rising Western European and trans-Atlantic community of values. This process extended beyond the political sphere and the decisively Western orientation of its early postwar governments. It also transformed West German society through countless encounters, travels and friendships. These were further fostered by influential institutions, such as the Franco-German Youth Office, German-American student exchanges and the Action Reconciliation Service for Peace. This lively exchange with Western countries shaped much of the generation that now bears responsibility in politics, the media and the universities.

It is a paradox of social change that even those members of the '68 generation who once revered Lenin and Mao, supported communist regimes and were blind to human rights violations behind the Iron Curtain later (sometimes much later) morphed into reliably liberal political and social actors espousing the core liberal values of Western Europe. Yet, even today, it is hard to say how stable this embrace of a liberal and democratic system would have been under challenging political or economic conditions. To date, it has never been exposed to a true stress test.

## **Yearning for freedom**

History unfurled very differently in the former East Germany. Under Soviet occupation, no time was lost in establishing a dictatorship following the Allied victory and the division of Germany into four occupation zones. The German Democratic Republic (GDR), founded in October 1949, subsequently belonged to the Soviet-dominated sphere for four decades, until just before its demise.

In many respects, the people of the GDR shared the fate of other Central and East European societies, whose hopes for finally living in freedom after the war and the Nazi horrors were bitterly dashed. Under Stalin's rule, communist dictatorships were established that brought economic, social and cultural harm as well as destruction to countries already devastated by war. Freedom and human rights counted for nothing; from then on, surveillance, discipline and repression characterized everyday life.

But the 40-year history of communist rule in Europe continually met with resistance and revolts, which were brutally repressed time and again. In every East Bloc country, people yearned for freedom. Countless numbers of them were imprisoned and convicted or had to go into exile. So far, the history of this diverse and courageous resistance has scarcely entered into the historical memory of Europe as a whole.

The significance of resistance in France's political and cultural self-understanding is indisputable. The Polish Home Army, the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, the Poznań Uprising of 1956 and the Solidarity movement are each important elements of Polish identity today. The case is similar in Germany for the resistance against Hitler and – more recently – for the June 1953 revolt against the Communist Party and the 1989 revolution. Catastrophes are burned into the collective memory, but so too are the dignity and courage of those who opposed tyranny and totalitarian ideologies, often risking their lives. Remembrance of them is not only an expression of respect and gratitude, but also an affirmation of values. Anyone who pays tribute to Sophie and Hans Scholl also honors their principles and their love of freedom.

## **Manifestations of civil courage**

When people in Central and East Europe come together to proudly commemorate their Peaceful, Singing or Velvet revolutions of 1989, these events do not merely hark back to the past. They are also manifestations of civil courage, human dignity and love of freedom that are crucial for the future. That is what makes these remembrances valuable for society, today and tomorrow. Past experiences become resources for the future.

However, the free Europe of the 21st century has not exactly seized this opportunity. There are no shared symbols, such as memorial sites or days of remembrance, commemorating the 20th-century struggle for freedom. Nor have there been political decisions to support systematic research into this history. It is as though we have no need to harness the power of memory to confront possible dangers in the future – be they new authoritarian tendencies or ideological temptations. In the wake of dictatorships or civil wars, it remains unusual for societies – and, even more so, their elites – to devote time and effort to reflecting critically and especially self-critically on the past.

Why such restraint? More than a few individuals are concerned with saving their own skin, continuing their career under new conditions or just repressing inconvenient questions that could detract from their self-image. Of course, they use other reasons to justify themselves publicly: Looking backward is a drain on energy needed for reconstruction; no one is really interested in the past anymore; reminders of human rights violations impede initiatives for reconciliation and social peace; confronting the perpetrators and political decision-makers only spawns new injustices. In some East Bloc countries – especially those that were part of the former Soviet Union – there is also a strong tendency to blame the Russians alone; phenomena such as collaboration and betrayal among the native populace become virtually invisible.

It is quite possible that continuities in personnel reinforce this trend. Has anyone ever asked about the political past of all the staff members assigned to the European Parliament and the European Commission after the accession of the Central and East European countries, or their links to the secret police? Nor is there reason to believe that background checks have been done for German EU staffers.

## **Fostering a culture of remembrance**

In the face of such widespread collective denial, those who refuse to forget – whether as individuals or groups – have a hard time. Their efforts rarely

reach the public. They may be defamed, persecuted politically and legally, and sometimes even physically attacked.

Yet dangers lurk when politicians too eagerly embrace this subject. They may use their political opponents' past (or even just allegations about it) as a cudgel, especially when no documentary evidence is available to contest the charges. When wrestling with the past becomes a political weapon without the rule of law affording protection against abuse, this can be just as harmful as silence and inaction.



A society that closes its eyes to its own past damages its own self-awareness and thus its culture. No one contests this with regard to the appealing elements of their own history. But the culture of remembrance envisioned here calls for an unromanticized view of the past. It is not limited to heroic stories, triumph and self-sacrifice. Denial of a society's own responsibility, failures and betrayal of freedom spawns nostalgia or falsifies history altogether. As Wolf Biermann said: "A half-truth is a whole lie."