

# Fight or flight: two views of freedom

Munich

**T**he "German Question", seemingly safely buried for 40 years, has returned with a vengeance. The historical joke is on everybody who has been paying diligent lip service to German unity while not expecting it to occur in his lifetime. Suddenly, the European deck is being reshuffled at dizzying speed, turning the absurd dream of German unity into a real prospect for the first time since the Second World War. But none dare play — at least not yet.

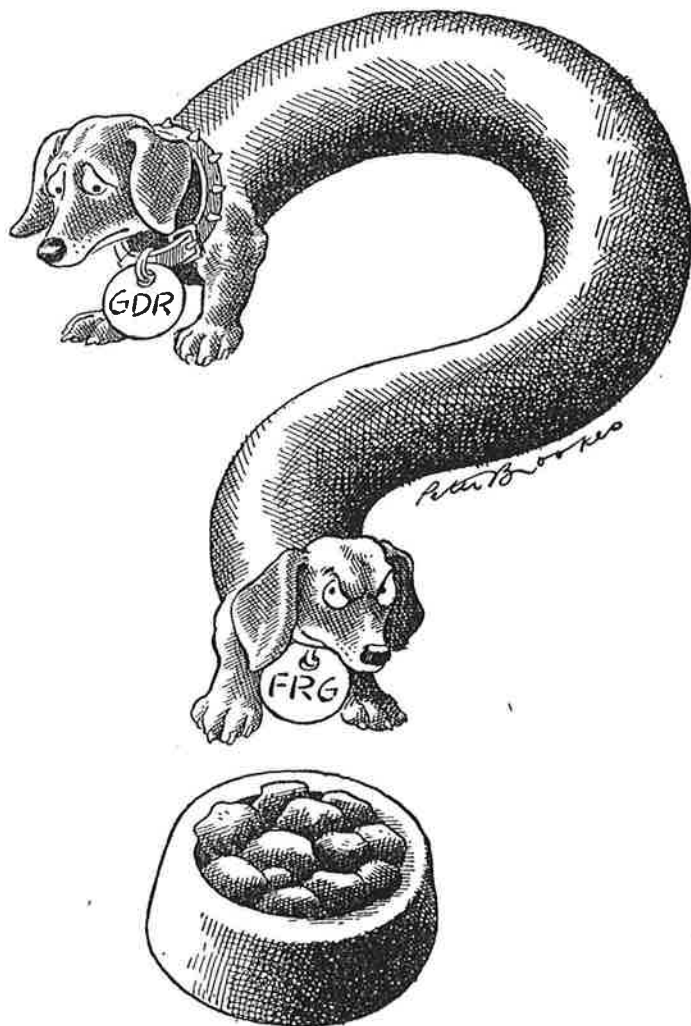
Take the West Germans. Yes, public opinion remains firmly in favour of reunification — at the latest count, 87 per cent. But the mood here does not match the numbers churned out by the computers of the professional pulse-takers. Once again, the dog that *didn't* bark furnishes the most telling clues.

You don't see crowds thronging the streets of Bonn, Munich or Frankfurt chanting "Reunification now!" For that matter, you don't even hear this call in Leipzig or East Berlin, though hundreds of thousands are demonstrating in the streets day after day. Their placards read "A Free Press for a Free People" or just "Reform". But "Deutschland Uber Alles"? No.

Or listen to the politicians. Though Chancellor Kohl said yesterday that there were fewer reasons than ever for the two Germanys to remain divided, what he offered was economic aid to the East, partly an attempt to persuade East Germans not to leave their country. He has already appealed to East Berlin to make life "tolerable" in the "worker and peasant state" so that those "who want to stay can stay".

For once, party politics is ignored. The ruling Christian Democrats and the opposition Social Democrats are united in common embarrassment and confusion. The call is not "Please stay put" — but almost. Using ponderous circumlocutions, the leader of the left, Hans-Jochen Vogel, has addressed his fellow-Germans in the East thus: "We implore all those who are thinking about emigration to examine carefully whether they would not rather support the process of democratization in the GDR."

Counting 1.5 million would-be refugees, Egon Bahr, the Social Democratic architect of the "New Ostpolitik," has put it most bluntly: if they all came, "this would create an intolerable situation not only here, but also



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But the stage management of diplomacy did not work very well when yesterday's passive crowd suddenly shouldered aside the professional actors and proceeded to occupy both the stage and the house. In East Germany, which has been sullenly quiet since the swiftly suppressed rebellion of 1953, we are witnessing a genuine revolution, which is all the more effective because it is non-violent.

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zero in one fell swoop the political credit he has so painstakingly accumulated in the West. What, then, is the limit of Soviet forbearance? East Germany, after all, is not Hungary. Home to 380,000 crack Soviet troops, it is Moscow's great prize of the Second World War and the strategic brace of its possessions in Eastern Europe.

Nobody knows what the Soviet "bottom line" is, perhaps not even the Soviets themselves. Presumably, they are banking on reforms that will take the steam out of the revolt. But that is not happening. Those East Germans who stay at home will continue to fight the regime until victory — democracy — is theirs. On the other hand, those who are flooding across the border do so precisely because they expect not the triumph of freedom but renewed repression — so they run while the running is good.

**B**ut whether it is fight or flight, the name of the game is further instability. Assume, first, an unhindered refugee flow: if 1.5 million of the best and brightest leave, the GDR will shudder to a halt. Already now, hospitals and factories are threatened by closure because nurses and skilled workers have "Trabbihopped" — the word derives from the two-stroke Trabant car — to the West. It is hard to imagine any regime that would look on stoically as the economy collapses.

Now assume that democracy triumphs. Take the Communist emblem out of the East German flag and you are left with stripes of black, red and gold — the colours of West Germany. Exorcising Prusso-Socialism would eliminate the only reason for having a separate East German state. In this scenario, reunification is the logical consequence of democratization.

What will the hesitant West Germans do if a freely elected parliament in East Berlin votes in favour of *Anschluss*? Will they build a wall on their side? What will the Russians do? Tuck in their tails and slink off to Muscovy?

What will Europe do when faced with the powerhouse of a united Germany, especially if the guarantors of the old system, the US and the USSR, leave the continent to its own devices? The point about these questions is that yesterday's answers have begun to sound hollow, now that everything is possible.

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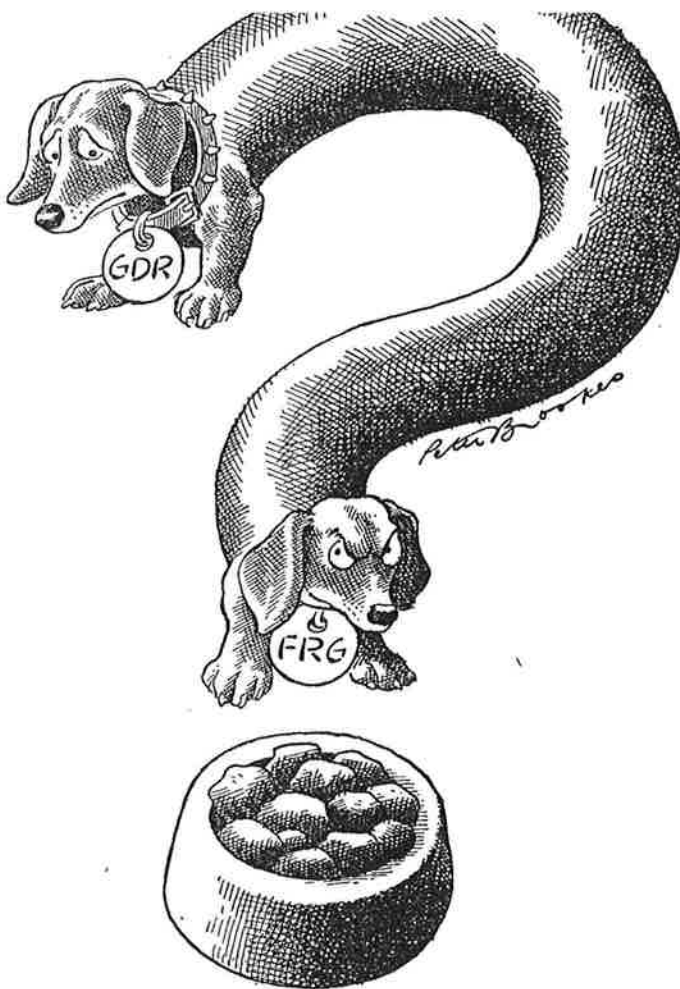
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Bonn's allies and neighbours have been more polite. No, says President Bush, he is not worried about German reunification, but "it takes time, it takes a prudent evolution". In the meantime, as the daily intake from the East has swollen to about 10,000, the diplomats have become a bit more dour. "Reunification is very remote," demurred the Polish foreign minister; "the existence of two German states



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**F**irst, the Honecker regime was swept from power — almost with a flick of the hand. Since then, the new Krenz regime has been on a continuous rout, delivering one concession after another. You want politburo heads to roll? Here they are. You want to travel freely? Here is a new law, and passports for all.

Alexis de Tocqueville, the chronicler of the French *ancien régime*, was right: a bad govern-

Bernard Levin's column will appear tomorrow.

ment is most grievously endangered when it starts to mend its ways. The East German populace, previously more docile than any other in the Warsaw Pact, has tasted power and will not let go. Nor is there any end in sight.

Reforms don't staunch the haemorrhage; indeed they seem to propel ever more refugees across the border with Czechoslovakia and into West Germany. Nor do they improve the standing of Mr Krenz. To wager on his survival is about as safe as betting on the IRA converting to Protestantism.

We must look to Moscow to explain why the Krenz regime is cowed and its subjects are not. Gorbachov simply does not seem to care. His predecessors sent in the tanks when the East Germans rebelled in 1953, and again when the Hungarians followed in 1956. But after the Hungarian Communists voted to abolish their party, Gorbachov sent them a congratulatory telegram.

At the very least it is true to say that Gorbachov does not want blood on his hands. Forcible repression would reduce to

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It would be nice if each and all were to obey the counsel of prudence invoked by President Bush. The reasonable thing to do is to take one step at a time, to let democracy and disarmament take their course before redrawing borders, to allow Europe to grow together before the two Germanys do.

But we are living in the midst of a revolution, and revolutions are rarely reasonable.

Josef Joffe is foreign editor and leader writer of *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Munich.

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