Volume 9. Two Germanies, 1961-1989
Surveys Show a Strong Sense of Belonging Together after Four Decades of Division (October 23, 1989)

Although active hopes for reunification had all but disappeared, the conservative pollster Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann drew on the results of over four decades of research to suggest that there was still a relatively stable sense of mutual belonging between East and West Germans – one that fueled hopes for the eventual return of a united state.

The Sense of Belonging Together Has Remained Strong

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The following question was posed in an Allensbach[1] survey in late September – early October [1989]: Do you think that in the future, when history books write about the flood of Germans leaving the GDR and coming to us now, it will be reported as a German national event, or do you think that it's not that important? Sixty percent said: "It will appear in history books as a national event"; 22 percent said: "It was not all that big a deal"; and 18 percent were undecided.

It's as if the sight of the young people, of the families with children who were shown on TV as they arrived and got off the trains, brought something into our consciousness that has not been a major subject for a long time – either in textbooks or the media. An Allensbach question from late September – early October went as follows: "What do you think will be more important in giving a sense of well-being to Germans from the GDR who are now coming to us: our higher standard of living or the freedom here?" Sixty percent answered: "the freedom here"; 26 percent said "our higher standard of living"; and 14 percent were undecided.

Since the mid-1950s, public opinion research has been called upon to confirm that Germans [in the Federal Republic] do not want to see their prosperity threatened by any ideas about German reunification. And then more urgently in the 1970s, [to confirm] that a sense of two separate German states had developed, both here in the West and in the East.

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[1] The Allensbach Institute for Public Opinion Research [Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach] is Germany's best known institute of its sort. Founded in 1947 by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, it tends towards the conservative side of the politic spectrum. The institute, which takes its name from the town in which it is headquartered, is located on the Bodensee in the far south of Germany – eds.

In 1965, “reunification is most important” was still the most popular response (with 45 percent) to the question posed since 1951, “What do you think is the most pressing issue deserving of general attention in the Federal Republic?” After the conclusion of the treaties with the Eastern countries [*Ostverträge*] in 1971, the response “reunification is most pressing,” was given by only 3 percent in January 1971 and later by one percent at most. This question could no longer be used to measure developments as regards the national sense of belonging together. Public opinion polls in the 1970s and 1980s reported that fewer and fewer schoolchildren had ever heard of GDR cities such as Rostock and Halle, and that no one reckoned with reunification; the question was no longer considered relevant.

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In social research, one speaks of a tool having lost its effectiveness if real conditions change to such an extent that developments can no longer be followed with questions that had been used over an extended period. In 1970, we started looking for a new question with which to gauge the mutual feeling of belonging between West Germans and Germans in the GDR. The question had to be far removed from topicality and politics in order to remain applicable as a measuring stick for as long as possible.

We thus devised the “Black Sea question”: “Imagine that you are on vacation at the Black Sea. One day you meet another German and in the course of your conversation you discover that he comes from the GDR, he lives in the GDR. What is your first thought when you hear this?” The interviewer would then hand the interviewee nine cards and say, “Take a look at these cards. Which ones apply?” It was necessary to structure the question by using cards with possible answers in order to be able to follow and compare the way in which attitudes developed over a long period of time. The suggested responses were devised so that four demonstrated a feeling of national ties, or at least a special interest, and five indicated estrangement.

The question was posed twelve times between 1970 and 1989 to a representative cross-section of the population. The findings showed that underneath the level of day-to-day topicality, in which German unity was insignificant, there was a stream of sentiment that continued virtually independent of the length of German division.

Most frequent was the statement: “I would be curious to talk with him.” This was the response of 71 percent in 1970 and 71 percent in early 1989. There is no sign of the often-presumed lack of interest or apathy.

“I would be happy,” said 61 percent in 1970 and 57 percent nineteen years later. “I think we’d get along well as Germans abroad,” said 59 percent in 1970 and 54 percent in early 1989. “I’d suggest having a drink together,” said 45 percent in 1970 and 51 percent in 1989.

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Those under thirty always show a trend – though usually weak – towards greater distance vis-à-vis the other German state. Does that mean that a gap is gradually widening? According to our data that is not the case. If it were true that the statements of younger interviewees indicated the beginning of a separation in national sentiments, then this separation should gradually continue and become greater over roughly two decades. Since the actual findings did not change, this must be interpreted as meaning that the younger generation gradually grows into a sense that Germans belong together and that this small sense of distance should be interpreted not as a

future prognosis, but rather as an interesting symptom indicating the process by which such a feeling gradually grows.

In view of the fact that any hopes or expectations for German reunification have been virtually abandoned since 1970, we developed another question in 1973 with which to measure attitudes: “Here is a sentence from the Basic Law. Could you please read it?” The interviewer would then hand over a piece of paper with the following text: “The entire German people are called upon to achieve the unity and freedom of Germany in free self-determination.” The question followed: “What do you think? Should this sentence continue to be included in the Basic Law, or do you think it should be deleted?” In 1973, 73 percent said, “It should continue to be included in the Basic Law”; in 1989, 75 percent gave that response.

With new questions, we gradually approached a sentiment among Germans that was once described by the expression “in the waiting room of history.” In early 1989, the interviewer presented a picture of a man who was saying: “One has to work towards German unification, even if it cannot be achieved immediately. With such great goals people have to accept that they might not personally experience their completion.” The corresponding interview question was: “Would you agree with this or not?” Sixty-one percent said they would “agree” and 20 percent said they would “not agree.” Nineteen percent were undecided.

Another question asked in early 1989 was: “Is the German Question still open, or is it no longer open?” We were concerned whether this question, which includes terminology relevant to policy towards the GDR (“German Question still open”), was too far removed from our ideal. A question used in a public opinion poll should be worded so that someone could pose it to a neighbor over the backyard fence. But people seemed to have no trouble with the wording. Fifty-one percent said the German Question was still open, and 24 percent said it was no longer open. Twenty-five percent were undecided, which is not an unusually high figure given that it was such a difficult question.

Finally, in two parallel surveys conducted in early 1989, we asked: “How do you feel? Would you say the people in the GDR are more compatriots or foreigners?” Seventy-one percent said “more compatriots” and 17 percent said “more foreigners.” Twelve percent were undecided. And: “If you think about the people in the GDR, do you think of them as Germans who just live in another part of Germany, or do you think of them as foreigners, like, for instance, the Swiss or Austrians?” Seventy-nine percent said “I think of them as Germans”; 13 percent said “foreigners” and 8 percent were undecided.

The Black Sea question, the question regarding the Basic Law preamble – in September, all these public opinion trends, which had been charted for almost two decades but could not be seen in practice, only in objective tables, were suddenly no longer just on paper but had transformed themselves overnight into a reality that could be seen on television. The impression left by the events meant that even complicated questions resulted in unusually high agreement by two-thirds of the population.

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But the naiveté that led many people since the mid-1950s to expect that it was possible simply to divide a people the way one splits a log – that chapter in history is now probably closed.

Source: Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, “Das Zusammengehörigkeitsgefühl ist stark geblieben” [“The Sense of Belonging Together Has Remained Strong”], *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, October 23, 1989, p. 13.

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