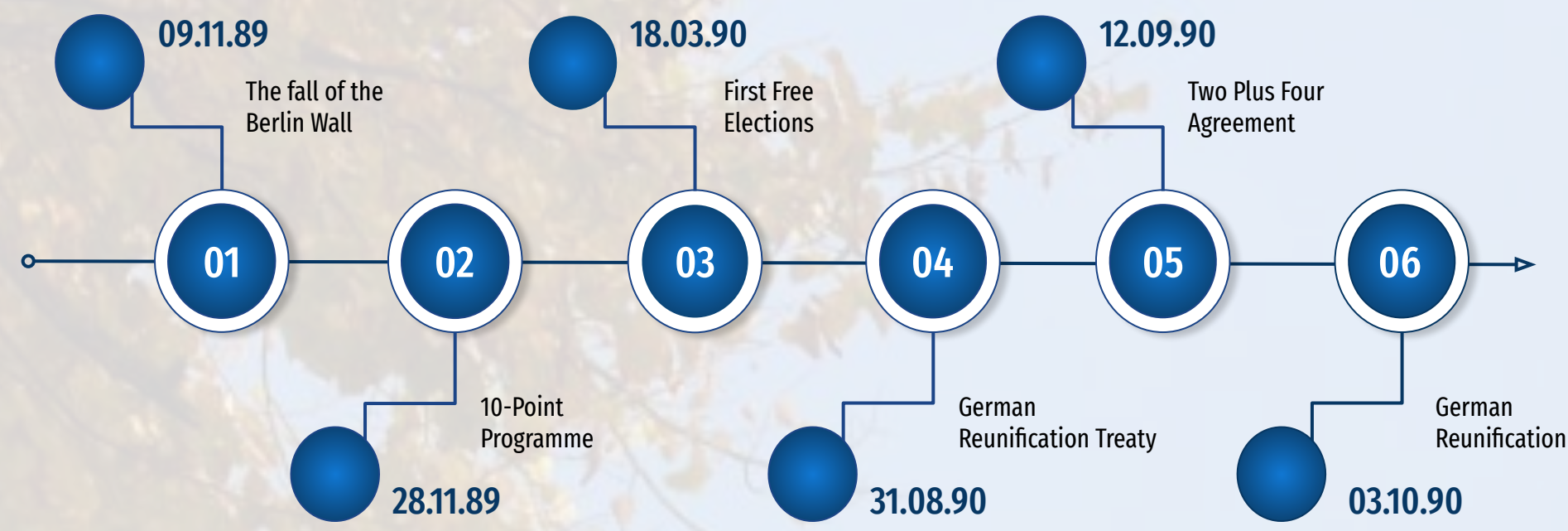


German Unity from 1990 to 2021

Perspectives from the University of Groningen

Geanne Kroes & Yanniek Moll - Rijksuniversiteit Groningen

KEY STEPS IN GERMAN REUNIFICATION



POLITICAL REACTIONS IN THE NETHERLANDS

When the Berlin Wall fell, the Netherlands just had conducted its national elections and a government had just been formed two days prior. The political establishment was relatively slow to respond to the occurrences in Berlin. The West German Chancellor, Helmut Kohl, was keen on reunifying the GDR and FRG under a western-style government. In order to reach this objective, he presented a 10-points plan with the major steps and aims of the process, which included western values in the east through the establishment of institutions such as free elections. An integral point of the plan was not only to prepare the east for the west but also vice versa. Helmut Kohl was convinced that Eastern Europe would play an important role in the future of the European Union.

Many foreign leaders, including Margaret Thatcher and the Dutch Prime Minister Ruud Lubbers, were skeptical towards German reunification from the beginning and especially after the fall of the Wall. Many Dutch politicians stressed that they were in favor of establishing freedom and democracy, but critical concerning reunification. In this sense, the Dutch government did not take a very different stance from other Western European nations. In the end, the Dutch politicians and the public chose to be more accepting of the German wishes, even though the Dutch did not have much to say when it came to the diplomatic and political processes surrounding reunification.



Helmut Kohl & Ruud Lubbers, 30 november 1987 (CC0 - Rob Croes)

CURRENT CULTURAL RELATIONS BETWEEN GRONINGEN AND GERMANY

While nowadays, the cultural relations between Groningen province and Germany are flourishing, the crimes and atrocities of the Holocaust and the Second World War remain part of Groningen's cultural memory. The *Stolpersteine* project reminds visitors of them, and of the legacy of the post-war peace that reunified Europe and set us on a trajectory of cooperation and solidarity.



Gerardus, 2010, Stolpersteine Groningen: 11-04-2010 Jannes Noorman.



Groningen is a partner town to three German towns: Hamburg, Bremen and Oldenburg. Together with Hamburg, Groningen is working on a hydrogen project which promises ecological progress. The city also welcomes thousands of tourists from Germany each year that come to see the Christmas markets and flower markets. German culture is vivid in Groningen, also thanks to the Goethe-Institut that organizes dozens of events, often in cooperation with the University of Groningen. Last but not least, hundreds of students at the University of Groningen are interested in German language and culture. For this reason, the student-organization *Grimm und Kluge*, now integrated into the Student Association *Esperia*, has evolved to offer a connection between students and scholars specializing in German.

CITIZENS' VIEWS: TESTIMONIALS FROM GRONINGEN ABOUT 1989/1990

News of the fall of the Berlin Wall soon reached the citizens of Groningen. Both the national Dutch newspapers and regional newspapers in Groningen reported extensively on this crucial event. Many opinion pieces appeared in these regional newspapers, showing that the fear for a united Germany, especially among the older population, increased to an extent.

Nevertheless, many Groningers generally had and have a positive attitude towards the reunification of Germany. The following quotes are from qualitative interviews with people who experienced the process of the German reunification and who lived in the province of Groningen at the time.

"In my environment, it was thought that a unified Germany would not only be good for the economy, but also for the German culture, for example." (Kiny, 80)

However, the speed at which the reunification came about also raised some doubts:

"I have wondered whether the reunification did not come too quickly for the GDR residents at the time. The GDR had to adapt to the FRG in a short period of time and, in my opinion, some extra time would have been needed to overcome these differences." (Jan, 78)

REACTIONS IN THE DUTCH MEDIA

Various surveys in the 1990s showed that between 50 and 70% of the Dutch population were positive about German reunification.

Tabelle 4: Die Niederländische Bevölkerung und die deutsche Einheit (März 1989 - Oktober 1990) in %

Quelle	Monat/Jahr	Befürworter	Gegner	Keine Meinung
NIPO*	03.89	57	14	22
Flash/Eurobarometer	11.89	76	12	12
Intomart	13.11.89	60	18	22
Interview	29.11.89	54	27	19
NIPO*	02.90	51	24	5
Interview	15.2.90	52	23	25
Intomart	02.90	50	25	25
NIPO	03.90	66	24	10
NIPO	04.90	64	22	14
Intomart	07.90	67	9	25
Flash/Eurobarometer	10.90	70	16	14
Eurobarometer	11.90	70	16	15

* gleichgültig; 7%
* gleichgültig; 20%

Sources: Der niederländische Beirat für Frieden und Sicherheit, *Deutschland als Partner*, Den Haag 1994, p. 86, cited in Friso Wielenga, *Im Feind zum Partner, Die Niederlande und Deutschland seit 1945*, Münster 2000, p. 21; NRC Handelsblad, 10 Nov. 1989, p. 1.



It was striking that many young people were positive and that the number of positive respondents decreased with age. When it became clear that German reunification was not only theoretical but actually imminent, the proportion of positive respondents declined. The decline in the number of supporters was striking in all of Germany's neighbouring countries, but the number in the Netherlands was very large.

When the fall of the Berlin Wall was announced, the events became widely discussed in Dutch evening news broadcasts and the next morning newspapers. A wave of sympathy for the East German population dominated the Dutch newspapers. Alongside the joy at freedom of the GDR citizens, however, confusion and uncertainty about the future of Germany and Europe were also sensed.

The dual image of positivity and criticism was present in the Dutch newspapers up to and including the official reunification (and thus also emerges from the main articles in the newspapers on October 3rd, 1990).

ON DUTCH BOYFRIENDS AND EDUCATIONAL REVOLUTIONS: CLAUDIA RUSCH'S MEMORIES

One of the most popular contemporary literary testimonials about life in the GDR and after the reunification is Claudia Rusch's *Meine freie deutsche Jugend*. In episodes about her childhood and adolescence, Rusch describes the GDR as a part of her everyday life, and the fall of the wall as her very own, individual revolution. In a memory about her first boyfriend after the reunification, a Dutch national, she writes:

"My Dutch boyfriend was not interested in the difficulties between the newly reunited East and West Germans. He liked to state that for someone from the Netherlands, all Germans were East Germans. Sometimes I laughed about this, sometimes I tried to explain to him that (...) the GDR had not simply 'disappeared'. It still lived within me, it did not allow me to take things for granted." (p. 135)



Claudia Rusch, *Meine freie deutsche Jugend*, Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer 2003. All translations are ours.

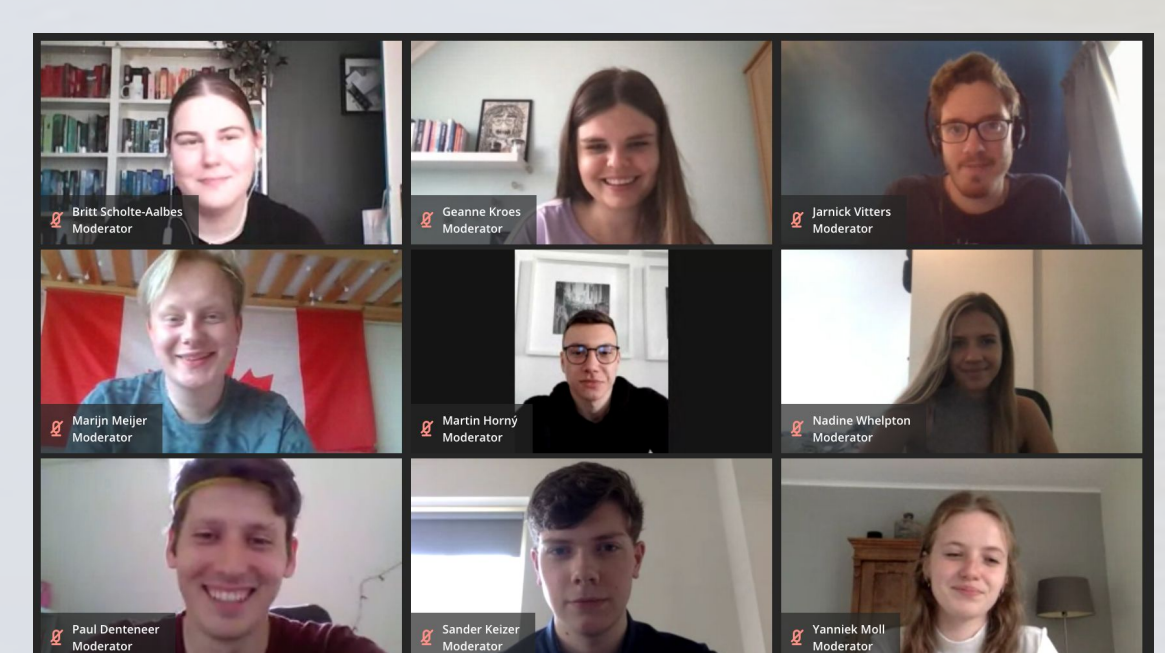
Another example for societal changes addressed by Rusch are those in the educational sector. In an earlier memory, Rusch describes how one of her teachers had criticized her engagement with the GDR peace movement:

"Mr. Petzke had me appear before the class and gave a lecture on why the peace movement was in fact counter-revolutionary and (...) West German propaganda, and why I had thus exposed myself as a class enemy. I wanted, he concluded, the end of the GDR and thus fascism back. It was ridiculous." (p. 37)

Here, Rusch outlines how even school children could be dismissed as class enemies. Education in the GDR was largely determined by Marxist worldviews and the authoritarian state. According to Rusch, it was therefore difficult for pupils and students to be 'different' from the East German masses. After the reunification, schools and universities within the GDR were forced to make far-reaching systemic changes. The consequences for today's Germany are still visible. Some East Germans felt and feel aggrieved because of what they saw as a too rapid and unjust changeover. Moreover, many teachers and professors who were faithful to the GDR regime lost their jobs and were disappointed about the changes after the reunification.

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