

Helmut Kohl's Welcome in Dresden (Retrospective account, 2005)

Abstract

Helmut Kohl recalls the warm welcome he received from the people of Dresden during a decisive visit in December 1989 and recounts the speech he delivered in front of the Frauenkirche, a famous landmark that had been destroyed in the Allied air raids of February 1945. Convinced that East Germans had rejected communism and sought unity, Kohl promised economic aid and described his hopes for a common future within a united Europe.

Source

My most crucial experience in the process of German unification was my visit to Dresden on December 19, 1989. When I landed with my entourage on the bumpy concrete runway of the Dresden-Klotzsche airport, it suddenly became clear to me: this regime is finished. Unification is coming!

Thousands of people were waiting for us at the airport; a sea of black, red, and gold flags fluttered in the cold December air – among them was an almost forgotten white and green Saxon state flag. When the airplane came to a halt, I descended the staircase and saw [Hans] Modrow waiting for me about 10 yards away with a hardened expression on his face. I turned to Rudolf Seiters, minister of the chancellery, and said: “That’s it. It’s in the bag.”

Tens of thousands lined the streets as we drove into the city: entire workforces had come out; entire school classes were standing there, cheering us on. Banners read: “Kohl, Chancellor of the Germans” and “The Federal State of Saxony Welcomes the Chancellor.” Modrow, who sat next to me in the car, seemed very self-conscious. In front of the Hotel Bellevue we were completely surrounded by a sea of people. People kept shouting “Helmut, Helmut,” “Germany, Germany,” or “We are one people,” but they also shouted that I should address them.

I had not actually planned to give a speech, but at that moment it was clear to me that I had to talk to the people. Wolfgang Berghofer, Dresden’s mayor at the time, suggested that I speak in front of the ruins of the Frauenkirche. [...]

As I climbed the stairs to the wooden rostrum, I could feel the great hopes and expectations that the people had pinned on me. I gave them warm regards from their fellow citizens in the Federal Republic of Germany. Those words alone brought cheers from the crowd. I gestured to show that I wanted to continue speaking. It got very quiet. I then continued:

“The second thing I would like to convey is a word of acknowledgment and admiration for this peaceful revolution in the GDR. It is the first time in German history that people have demonstrated in a spirit of nonviolence, with seriousness, earnestness, and solidarity, to build a better future. For that I give all of you my most heartfelt thanks.”

Again there was thunderous applause, and then it got very quiet as I continued to speak. I said it was a demonstration for democracy, for peace, for freedom, and for the self-determination of our people, and then I went on:

“And dear friends, for those of us in the Federal Republic, self-determination also means that we respect

your opinion. We do not want to – and will not – impose our will on anyone else. We respect your decision regarding the future of the country. [...] We will not abandon our compatriots in the GDR. And we know – and let me say this amidst the enthusiasm that I am so pleased to experience here – how difficult this path to the future will be. But let me also shout out to you: Together we will succeed on this path to Germany's future.”

I then informed the hundred thousand who had gathered of the results of my talks with the GDR minister presidents, and I said that by this spring we wanted to conclude an agreement on a treaty community between the Federal Republic and the GDR. And that close cooperation in all areas was also planned.

“We especially want to cooperate as closely as possible in the economic area, with the clear goal of improving living conditions in the GDR as quickly as possible. We want the people here to feel comfortable. We want you to be able to stay in your homes and find good fortune here. It is crucial that the people in Germany can come together in the future, that freedom of travel in both directions is guaranteed. We want the people in Germany to be able to meet wherever they want.”

I had the impression that the people assembled in front of the Frauenkirche were already looking toward a unified Germany. It was this prospect that filled them with enthusiasm, not so much the results of my negotiations. So while there was a surge of applause when I spoke of the free elections that were about to take place in the GDR, the enthusiasm that followed my mentioning of the prospects that would thereby open up was absolutely indescribable:

“You will have a freely elected government. Then the time will come for what I have called confederative structures, that is, joint government committees, so we can live in Germany with as much common ground as possible. And let me also say on this square, which is so rich in history, that my goal – should the historical hour permit it – remains the unity of our nation. And, dear friends, I know that we can achieve this goal and that the hour will come when we will work together towards it, provided that we do it with reason and sound judgment and a sense for what is possible.”

In order to keep the enthusiasm on the square from going overboard, I spoke very matter-of-factly of the long and difficult path to this common future, just as I had done in Berlin on November 10th:

“We, the Germans, do not live alone in Europe and in the world. One look at a map will show that everything that changes here will have an effect on all of our neighbors, those in the East and those in the West. There is no point if we fail to acknowledge that many of our neighbors view this path with concern and some even with fear. Nothing good can come of fear.

And still, as Germans we must say to our neighbors: In view of the history of this century, we understand some of these fears. We will take them seriously. For us, that means we wish to represent our interests as Germans. We say “yes” to the right to self-determination, which all peoples in the world should have, also the Germans. But, dear friends, this right to self-determination only makes sense for the Germans if we do not lose sight of the security needs of others. We want to enter a world with greater peace and greater freedom, which sees more cooperation with each other than opposition against each other. The house of Germany, our house, must be built under a European roof. That must be the goal of our policies. [...]

But, dear friends, true peace is not possible without freedom. That is why you are fighting and demonstrating for freedom in the GDR, and that is why we are supporting you, and that is why you have our solidarity. [...] Now it is up to us to continue peacefully along this path in the time ahead of us, to proceed with patience, sound judgment, and together with our neighbors. Let us work together toward this goal, let us help each other in a spirit of solidarity. From here in Dresden, I send my greetings to all our compatriots in the GDR and the Federal Republic of Germany.”

In closing, I called out to the crowd: “God bless our German fatherland!”

I was deeply moved, so it was very hard for me to conclude my speech. What would happen now? But the people remained calm; however, no one made any move to leave the square. Then something happened that signaled to everyone that it was time to go. An elderly woman climbed onto the podium, embraced me, started to cry, and said quietly: “We all thank you!”

The microphones were all still on and everyone could hear it. Then the people started to disperse. Exhausted and happy we hurried through the cordon of people to the cars that brought us back across the Elbe River.

[...]

Long after midnight, we walked to Hotel Bellevue, where I invited our small delegation to come to my room for a drink. Together we made a preliminary assessment of the last few hours, and I said once more, “I think we’ll do it; we’ll get unification. It’s rolling. I don’t think it can be stopped anymore, the people want it. The regime is definitely finished.”

Source: Helmut Kohl, *Erinnerungen 1982–1990*. Munich, 2005, pp. 1020–28.

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Recommended Citation: Helmut Kohl’s Welcome in Dresden (Retrospective account, 2005), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/a-new-germany-1990-2023/ghdi:document-2889>> [March 22, 2025].