

Christina Morina

A Thousand Departures

[Tausend Aufbrüche]

Outline + Sample Translation



Non-Fiction, History

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A diverse and wilful democracy: the first history of post-1990 German politics and culture

What motivates the federal republic? Nearly 75 years since its creation and more than thirty since reunification, German democracy is under pressure: political extremism is spreading, the major political parties are battling vanishing approval ratings, and resentment and anti-democratic feelings are on the rise. How did we get here?

Renowned historian Morina believes that to understand modern German history, we need to stop thinking of it as a straightforward story of democracy and dictatorship. In "A Thousand Departures", she examines countless letters to politicians, petitions, leaflets and other documents to show how citizenship and democracy have meant different things to different people over the past 40 years. For the first time, this "people's history" of modern Germany looks at the 1989 revolution in light of the history of German democracy – revealing the diverse and stubborn ways in which Germans from all walks of life, east and west, have approached democracy in theory and in practice, how their ideas are shaping the so-called Berlin Republic, and the associated opportunities and dangers.

Christina Morina was appointed professor of history at Bielefeld University in 2019. She specialises in contemporary history, and is particularly interested in the social history and remembrance of National Socialism, the political and cultural history of divided and reunited Germany, and in the relationship between history and memory. Morina studied history, political science and journalism at the universities of Leipzig, Ohio and Maryland, and obtained her PhD in 2007 with a thesis on the war against the Soviet Union in East and West German culture of remembrance. From 2008 to 2015, she was research assistant in the department of modern and contemporary history at the Friedrich Schiller University in Jena, where she was also promoted to professor in 2017, with a thesis on the origins of Marxism.

Sample Translation

By Elizabeth Janik

Introduction: An integrated history of democracy

The real problem facing us in the aftermath of 1989 is not what to think of communism. The vision of total social organization [...] lies in ruins. But the question of how to organize ourselves for the common benefit remains as important as ever. Our challenge is to recover it from the rubble.

TONY JUDT (2010)

Last but not least, the friendly archivist brought me two nondescript cardboard boxes. They were labeled “Building democratic structures: Initiatives and associations, Fall 1989– (informational material)” – hardly preparing me for the blast of democracy that struck as soon as I opened the two lids. Inside the boxes were hundreds of flyers, letters, concept papers, and protest announcements from the months around the fall of the Berlin Wall. The papers were carefully sorted from A to Z—from *Aktion Pleiße ans Licht, Leipzig* (an initiative to revitalize the Pleisse River) to *Zentralstelle für Recht und Schutz der Kriegsdienstverweigerer aus Gewissensgründen e. V., Bremen* (a clearinghouse for conscientious objectors). The documents came from initiatives with names like Aufbruch 90, “Knowledge for the People” Movement, and Forum for Direct Democracy, and they sought to transform this historic moment of liberalization into a laboratory for democratic fresh starts. “Real” democracy was to be established at last in East Germany, but not just there. In these collected documents, a thoroughly mobilized society was contemplating ideas for the radical reinvention of its everyday life, its neighborhoods, workplaces, schools and childcare centers, voluntary associations, local government, and—of course—the constitution of the entire country. I took notes and photographed every single page, marveling and sometimes smiling at the ravenous hunger for democracy, and I thought about the many connections between both parts of Germany that have since almost vanished in today’s public discussions of the 1989 revolution. After repacking the boxes, I walked down the wide staircase in Leipzig’s “House of Democracy”—a building that has more than earned its name, while exuding the authority of a revered academic hall—and I thought: *a thousand new beginnings!*

This living memorial to the revolution of 1989 is located in a part of the country where—in the most recent federal election, in the fall of 2021—the radical right Alternative for Germany (AfD) became the strongest political party with 24.6 percent of the vote. The

AfD also received the most votes (24 percent) in the neighboring state of Thuringia. In Brandenburg and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, the AfD became the second-strongest party (around 18 percent), and in Saxony-Anhalt, the third-strongest (19.6 percent), just behind the center-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU). Thus, in all five former East German states, the AfD received around one-fifth of all votes cast. As in 2017, the entire political map of eastern Germany was blue or deep blue (the AfD's party color)—whereas the party earned “only” 10 percent of the vote in western Germany. The AfD earned the lowest proportion of the vote in the Cologne II constituency (2.9 percent), and the highest in Görlitz in eastern Saxony (32.5 percent). This electoral imbalance meant that, in the year 2021, German TV screens displayed a color-coded political map with the outlines of the old West Germany and East Germany as clearly visible as if the Berlin Wall had never fallen. The disparity was not only evident in the AfD returns, but also in the electoral performance of the far-left party, Die Linke. Despite heavy losses, Die Linke did much better in eastern constituencies (which were shaded lavender) in this ninth federal election of reunified Germany.

What connects these two historical developments—the democratic revolution of positive new beginnings, and the disproportionate support for right-wing populism and radicalism in the same part of Germany? How did the democratic mobilization of a society that liberated itself provide fertile soil for an antidemocratic revolt?

The *thousand new beginnings* of the fall of 1989 have had an ambiguous afterlife in the history of German democracy. These new beginnings spawned an unprecedented degree of hope and uncertainty, intrepidity and ambiguity, political emancipation and social polarization—and they continue to do so today. This contradictory balance sheet is frequently viewed all too schematically, and reduced to one side or the other: either the years before the upheaval of 1989, or after; either the history of dictatorship in the GDR, or

democracy in the Federal Republic; either the East German experience of an abrupt “takeover,” or its brazen execution by West Germans—and finally, either an insecure society of democracy skeptics, or a mature, liberal civil society.

This book takes another view—describing, for the first time, the transformation in how Germans in East and West understood democracy and citizenship, both before and after the caesura of 1989. My focus is on the democratic ideas, expectations, and experiences of “average” citizens. I simultaneously trace the political and cultural effects of the revolution of 1989/90, which have unquestionably inspired the reunified country while also unsettling it deeply.