

THIRTY-THREE MOMENTS OF THE SOVIET POSITION ON THE GERMAN QUESTION. A MICROHISTORY

Tsotne Tchanturia

Associate Professor

Georgian Institute of Public Affairs, GEORGIA

tsotnetchanturia@gmail.com

Abstract. This article presents the microhistory of the Soviet position on the German question from 1985 to 1990, drawing on Russian-language archival materials, mainly Gorbachev's correspondence published by the Gorbachev Foundation. In addition to offering this microhistory, it aims to illuminate the long-debated "not one inch eastward" assurance by analysing its context. This research demonstrates that, during 1989-1990, Western oral pledges to the Soviet leadership regarding NATO's non-enlargement sometimes specifically referred to the territory of the (former)¹ GDR, at other times to the Eastern Bloc beyond the (former) GDR, and in some instances resembled a general promise of NATO's future non-enlargement to the east. Furthermore, the article highlights that during the negotiations on Germany, the Soviets had concerns about pro-NATO aspirations in the Eastern Bloc (beyond the GDR) and the risks of future NATO enlargement eastward, beyond the (former) GDR. Ultimately, the article proposes a theoretical framework to explain why the Soviets accepted a *status quo* that risked NATO's eastward expansion, despite their awareness of the associated risks and the absence of any legal guarantees against enlargement.

Keywords: Soviet Union, Gorbachev, FRG, GDR, NATO, Warsaw Pact, German question, German reunification, reunified Germany's military status, "not one inch eastward" assurance

1. INTRODUCTION

The title of this article is inspired by the 1973 Soviet espionage thriller TV series "Seventeen Moments of Spring". Although the connection between the two is mainly symbolic, readers might discover allusive parallels and differences. The series portrays seventeen days of a Soviet spy planted in Germany, who successfully

carries out his mission just before Germany's defeat in World War II. At that pivotal moment, the Soviets emerged victorious while Germany was defeated and divided. In contrast, this article explores another historical development involving the Soviets and Germans, portraying thirty-three moments of transformation in the Soviet position on the German question at the end of the Cold War. Here, unlike in the earlier case, Germany prevails and reunifies, while, considering what happened to the USSR later, the Soviet Union is defeated.

Since the period of *détente*, the 1970 Treaty of Moscow and the Helsinki Final Act served as the framework for relations between the USSR and the two Germanies. However, the late 1980s marked a significant shift in the Soviet stance. Under Mikhail Gorbachev's leadership, the two Germanies were reunified, with the Soviet Union among the approving parties. This period reflects a fascinating transformation in the Soviet position, shifting from a focus on maintaining the status quo of the two Germanies—one in NATO and the other in the Warsaw Pact—to endorsing a unified Germany in NATO. Overall, the entire process reflects a shift in the Soviet position from hardline rigidity to greater flexibility, culminating in September 1990 when they signed the Two Plus Four Agreement in Moscow, which was ratified in March 1991.

Readers may find this article novel for three main reasons: a) it presents a microhistory of the transformation of the Soviet position on the German question from 1985 to 1990, following Soviet negotiations and structural-conjunctural changes during this period, primarily based on Russian-language archival materials of Gorbachev's correspondence published by the Gorbachev Foundation; b) it attempts to shed new light on the long-debated and politicized discussion about the "not one inch eastward" assurance, clarifying its context, extent, and meaning; and c) it outlines the security concerns of the Soviets regarding the risks of NATO's expansion beyond (former) GDR territory before and during the negotiations on Germany. This particular feature is important since it revises some conventional wisdom regarding the

“not one inch eastward” assurance debate, specifically the notion that the promise concerned (could have concerned) only the (former) GDR territory, as the Soviets were not even considering NATO enlargement further eastward than the (former) GDR territory at that moment (this notion is also supported by additional reasons and arguments).

Besides describing the transformation of the Soviet position on the German question, this article clarifies that: a) the “not one inch eastward” assurance, which was reformulated to the Soviets in diverse forms by Western leadership during the negotiations on Germany, sometimes referred specifically to the (former) GDR territory, at other times clearly to the Eastern Bloc beyond the (former) GDR, and in some instances resembled a general promise of NATO’s future non-enlargement to the east; and b) well before and during the negotiations on Germany, part of the Soviet leadership was indeed concerned about the risks of NATO enlargement beyond the (former) GDR. This concern is clearly evident in their correspondence and memoranda of conversations. In addition, these Soviet suspicions are further justified now by new evidence from Czech, German, Hungarian, Polish, and Romanian archives presented in the recently published article in a journal on international security.

Also, this article attempts to provide a theory explaining why the Soviets ultimately accepted the status quo that risked NATO’s further eastward expansion beyond the (former) GDR territory, despite being aware of such risks and without receiving any legal promise of NATO non-enlargement².

2. FROM THE *STATUS QUO* TO THE FIRST MOMENT OF CHANGE

The point of departure for Gorbachev’s policy regarding the two Germanies was the framework established by the 1970 Moscow Treaty and the Helsinki Final Act. These agreements clarified the reality of two German states and the inviolability of frontiers

(although both also contained the option for freedom of self-determination).

Gorbachev's first formal meetings as General Secretary of the Soviet Union with German leaders were held on May 5, 1985, in Moscow. He first met Erich Honecker of the GDR, and later that day, he met Herbert Mies (Leader of the West German Communist Party, DKP) from the FRG and Horst Schmitt (Leader of the Socialist Unity Party of West Berlin, SEW) from West Berlin. The first meeting of Gorbachev with the FRG government representative was with the leader of the opposition, Willy Brandt, on May 27, 1985, in Moscow. Gorbachev expressed his support for the 1970 and 1975 agreements; regarding the Soviet position on German unity, he reminded Brandt of Stalin's words in 1942, spoken on the eve of the Nazi invasion, about Hitler's coming and going, but the German people and the German state remaining (Gorbachev 2008a, 568). He also spoke about his concerns regarding the risks of the "absorption of socialist countries". "This is, first of all, interference [...] and NATO is discussing this topic, but if this were the basis of policy, it would be a course for war", he mentioned (Gorbachev 2008a, 288). Some may not be entirely wrong if they find these words somewhat prophetic (but in the new context, of course).

At the Politburo meeting on March 17, 1986, Gorbachev mentioned that the question regarding the FRG was serious, but he advised the others not to engage in contacts with the FRG at the highest level just yet (Gorbachev 2008b, 488-489). Some weeks later, on June 13, again at the Politburo, Gorbachev said that at all meetings with partner countries, there was a general agreement that they all needed to work with the FRG. "They are all very connected to it, economically—first of all", he said. In the end, Gorbachev emphasised that they should not destroy the relationship with the FRG under any circumstances (Gorbachev 2008c, 161).

On July 21, 1986, Gorbachev met with Hans-Dietrich Genscher for the first time – they met in Moscow. According to a Pravda article published the following day, Gorbachev emphasised the

importance of the 1970 and 1975 frameworks and discussed the responsibilities of both the USSR and the FRG in constructing a “European home”, while remaining committed to their military-political alliances. He cautioned that dismantling the established structure in Europe would only result in chaos. Gorbachev also pointed out inconsistencies in the FRG’s policy (Gorbachev 2006, 15). While it is unclear what specific issues he was referring to, his remarks during the July 24 Politburo meeting about his conversation with Genscher suggest that their discussion was not quite harmonious: “We got some things across to their understanding... We didn’t mince words”, Gorbachev stated (Gorbachev 2008c, 340).

A year later, on the eve of the Glasnost policy, during his meeting with Erich Honecker on May 28, 1987, in Berlin, Gorbachev was officially still adhering to the *status quo*. However, in his discourse, one could sense his reform-mindedness and his attempt to influence his East German colleague. The situation in Europe is changing, and a new alignment of political forces is emerging, Gorbachev told Honecker. “We in the Politburo have discussed this issue more than once, and we believe that it would be useful for us to think together about relations with the FRG” (Gorbachev 2008d, 52). Two weeks later, on June 11, Gorbachev spoke about this conversation at the Politburo, mentioning that he had advised Honecker to find common ground with the FRG (Gorbachev 2006, 43).

The first clear moment of change in the Soviet position on Germany is evident in the June 11, 1987, Politburo memorandum. Here, Gorbachev stated that they needed “to do something extraordinary in relations with the FRG [in order to] pull this country closer”. It was also mentioned for the first time in Politburo meetings that the issue of German unification had gained traction in the West German press. “Our reaction is being tested through the media. They want us to decide”, said Gorbachev (Gorbachev 2006, 43).

3. FROM THE FIRST MOMENT OF CHANGE TO THE END OF THE BREZHNEV DOCTRINE

Even though the Soviets were convinced among themselves that they needed to draw the FRG closer and should be prepared to take extraordinary steps, in diplomatic meetings, they signalled only moderate openness, and their position still remained tough. On July 7, 1987, Gorbachev met with West German President Richard von Weizsäcker and Foreign Minister Genscher in Moscow. “We feel that we need to rethink our relations with the FRG”, Gorbachev told his German guests. “The Soviet Union advocates a serious, permanent, and thorough political dialogue with the FRG”. Gorbachev also made it clear that, although the Soviets were ready to consider all issues of mutual interest, they did not intend to back away from any position (Gorbachev 2008d, 253, 255).

The conversation also focused on the German question, and Gorbachev expressed the Soviet’s alertness regarding statements from the FRG that the German question remained open and that not everything was clear concerning “the lands in the east”, as well as the legitimacy of Yalta and Potsdam (Gorbachev 2008d, 254). In response, Weizsäcker stated that while Germans may live in two different states, belong to different security alliances, and have opposing social systems and ideologies, they are still one nation (Gorbachev 2008d, 591). Noteworthy is Gorbachev’s reaction to this statement: he remarked that he would prefer not to theorise about the concept of a nation in this context and emphasised the importance of the political aspect instead: “There are two German states with different socio-political systems and values”, he said (Gorbachev 2008d, 591). To summarise this conversation: Weizsäcker argued for the concept of two states and one nation, while Gorbachev focused on the idea of two states, preferring “not to theorise” about the concept of a nation, clearly indicating that he disagreed with Weizsäcker’s point of view.

The Soviets may have adhered to the *status quo* in their foreign correspondences, but among themselves, they were clear about a

new openness. This readiness is evident from the Politburo meeting on July 16, 1987. Here, the head of the International Department of the Central Committee of the CPSU and a long-time former Soviet ambassador to the USA, Anatoly Dobrynin, summarised Gorbachev's position: "The main idea of Mikhail Sergeyevich is to rethink the entire complex of relations between the FRG and the USSR. And we are implementing this - entering into a large dialogue with one of the largest countries" (Gorbachev 2006, 56).

The second moment of change in the Soviet position on Germany is evident from Gorbachev's meeting with the Minister-President of Bavaria and leader of the Christian Social Union, Franz Josef Strauss, on December 29, 1987, in Moscow. Here, Gorbachev signalled an end to the Brezhnev Doctrine: "We need to de-ideologise international relations. Let each nation choose its own path, its own system, religion, ideology, and its own way of life. It is the sovereign right of each nation to make its own choice without prompting or coercion" (Gorbachev 2009a, 176). This may be one of the earliest signals from Gorbachev to German politicians (if not to the Westerners in general) about ending the Brezhnev Doctrine.

Another novelty of Gorbachev's meeting with Strauss is that, unlike his earlier meeting with Weizsäcker and Genscher, Gorbachev did not question or engage in an argument about the concept of two states and one nation when Strauss spoke about it and when he said that he viewed this setting as a certain task imposed on Germans by history. Additionally, the CSU leader reassured Gorbachev, stating that they were not forcing the issue of German reunification, as this may happen in ten, fifty, or even a hundred years and made it clear that the key to unification was in Moscow and not in Washington (Gorbachev 2006, 75).

On May 11, 1988, Gorbachev met the new leader of the SPD, Hans-Jochen Vogel, in Moscow. Interestingly, during this meeting, Gorbachev addressed the Soviet view of the American approach toward the Soviets, which he deemed ineffective. However, from today's perspective, it appears to me that this approach was, in fact, quite effective, ultimately leading to the collapse of the USSR—an

outcome that may not have been the Americans' intention. "[Americans] are still trying to act from a position of strength. Someone has hammered it into their heads (or perhaps they decided it themselves) that 'Gorbachev and his team' are now in a difficult situation, and more can be squeezed out of us", told Gorbachev to Vogel (Gorbachev 2006, 87). This passage helps clarify Soviet perceptions of American intentions toward them, which, according to Gorbachev, were aimed at squeezing out as much as possible during a time of Soviet difficulty.

On October 19, 1988, Gorbachev met with representatives of the magazine *Spiegel*, led by its publisher Rudolf Augstein, at the Central Committee of the CPSU (Gorbachev 2009b, 530). In response to Augstein's question about whether he considered the German question still open, Gorbachev replied that any attempts to blur the boundaries between sovereign German states, especially through coercive experiments, were unacceptable, if not catastrophic (Gorbachev 2009b, 254). This passage is important because, in addition to showing that Gorbachev remains committed to the status quo of two German states, it also reflects some moderation in his position. When Gorbachev speaks about the unacceptability of blurring the borders, he emphasises "any attempts" but places special emphasis on coercive measures. What would Gorbachev have answered if he were asked about blurring the borders between the two Germanies based on the sovereign right of each nation to make its own choice without coercion? Would he have accepted such a process if it took on without coercion? – I believe he would.

Gorbachev's next meeting, which took place five days later, lends more credibility to the above-stated thesis. On October 24, Gorbachev had his first meeting with West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl – they met in Moscow. During this meeting, Kohl appeared to be well-informed about the recent cracks in Gorbachev's hard-line policy on Germany. He explicitly emphasised the unity of the German nation and stated that the changes they spoke about were only possible through peaceful, non-coercive

means and in collaboration with their neighbours. He also conveyed a calming message regarding the likely long wait—possibly spanning several generations—for German reunification. On his part, Gorbachev replied that discussions about addressing the question of unification with the political thinking of the 1940s and 1950s were provoking a reaction. Here, Gorbachev emphasised the unacceptability of approaching the unification question based on the political thinking of the era of the 1940s and 1950s. Additionally, it seemed, beyond it, there were no Soviet red lines. This particular feature of change constitutes the third moment of the Soviet position on the German question (Gorbachev 2006, 131, 133).

During June 12-15, 1989, Gorbachev visited the FRG. In his conversation with Kohl on June 12, Gorbachev once again signalled the end of the Brezhnev Doctrine. “In relation to our allies, we have a firm concept: each is responsible for themselves. We do not intend to teach anyone [...] In my opinion, what I have said clearly indicates whether there is a Brezhnev Doctrine or not”, he said (Gorbachev 2006, 161-162). The next day, while signing Soviet-West German documents, Gorbachev and Kohl made a joint statement, stating that all nations and states must have the right to freely determine their fate and build relationships based on international law, including choosing their political and social systems, while respecting self-determination; war should no longer be a tool of politics (Gorbachev 2006, 180-184) - this was nothing but a formal and public renunciation of the Brezhnev Doctrine. Two days later, at a press conference in Bonn, Gorbachev spoke those famous words about nothing being eternal under the moon and that the Wall may disappear when the conditions that gave rise to it are no longer present (Gorbachev 2010a, 505-506). This was the fourth moment of the Soviet position on the German question.

4. FROM POLITICAL CHANGES IN THE GDR TO THE FALL OF THE BERLIN WALL

During the autumn of 1989, very significant political changes took place in the GDR—changes that played a crucial role in the fall of the Wall and in the reunification the following year. Honecker's problems, both political and ideological, had long been visible; moreover, Gorbachev and Honecker seemed to be a really bad match. After recovering from serious health issues, Honecker faced an increasing refugee problem in the GDR; and in parallel, the internal SED process that led to his pressured resignation also entered a paroxysm. Therefore, Gorbachev's visit to the GDR on October 6-7 truly seemed like Judas's embrace of Jesus Christ. In the streets, people chanted: "Gorby, help us! Gorby, save us!" and in the SED cabinets, the second man of the GDR—Egon Krenz—was on the rise.

On the other hand, a Protestant reverend from the GDR—Markus Meckel—and the son of a pastor, Martin Gutzeit, were on their way to the formal foundation of the East German Social Democratic Party (SDP) on October 7, 1989, in Schwante, a town near Berlin (on September 18, they had the first initiative group meeting) (Meckel 2020, 202, 210)³. The SDP, together with the CDU in East Germany (where Lothar de Maizière successfully pressured the resignation of Ulbricht-Honecker period party leader Gerald Götting in November 1989), emerged victorious in the forthcoming March 18, 1990, GDR general election and participated in the 2+4 process, with Meckel representing the GDR as its Foreign Minister and Lothar de Maizière leading the government. The Honecker-Krenz substitution, alongside the foundation of the SDP, was the fifth moment that had an effect on the Soviet position on the German question. The cherry on top was the fall of the Wall on November 9—an event that drastically changed the socio-political atmosphere not only in the two Germanies but also worldwide, as it signified not only the inevitability of German unification but also

the end of the Cold War. This was the sixth moment of the Soviet position.

5. THIS WILL HAPPEN ANYWAY – FOREWARNINGS FROM WESTERN LEADERS

The fall of the Wall had a tremendous impact on the German question and acted as an accelerant for the entire process. This caused discomfort for the Soviets and made them realise that, with or without their support, Germany was going to reunify—and it would happen soon. The fall of the Wall also had a significant impact on internal political processes in the GDR. After the substitution of Honecker by Krenz as General Secretary of the SED, it was time for a change in government. Honecker's Prime Minister (Chairman of the Council of Ministers) was to be succeeded by a more reform-minded cabinet led by Hans Modrow. In a phone call on November 11, following the fall of the Wall, Kohl informed Gorbachev that a new government would be formed in the GDR the following week and that the FRG welcomed the start of reforms in East Germany (Gorbachev 2006, 247). The Stoph-Modrow substitution marked the seventh moment that affected the Soviet position on the German question.

On November 16, 1989, Gorbachev's adviser, Vadim Zagladin, met with Klaus Blech, the FRG ambassador to Moscow. Blech informed and somewhat tried to calm Zagladin by mentioning that, unlike some circles in West Germany, the FRG leadership was not considering the immediate reunification of Germany (Gorbachev 2006, 251). This was the eighth moment that affected the Soviet position—the Soviets were signalled that unification was going to happen, but the FRG leadership viewed it as a non-immediate process. This may have calmed the Soviets for a couple of weeks until Kohl's famous speech at the Bundestag, which clearly signalled the acceleration.

On November 28, 1989, Kohl addressed the Bundestag with a

speech titled “From Confederative Structures to Federation”. In this speech, Kohl outlined his famous Ten Point Program, which profoundly alarmed the Soviets (as well as some Western leaders, as this came as a real surprise) and became one of the critical turning points in the acceleration of German reunification. Inter alia, Kohl spoke about establishing confederal institutions, FRG-GDR integration, the irreversible process of change in the GDR, and much else⁴. If one were to give this address an informal name, it might be: “small steps were good, but now it is time for big steps”. This marked a pivotal moment in the history of the FRG, signalling the end of the policy of small steps in favour of larger, bolder actions. In parallel, Lothar de Maizière became the leader of the East German CDU—a party that emerged victorious in the upcoming March 18, 1990, general election in the GDR and formed a ruling coalition with the SDP. This was the ninth moment that affected the Soviet position.

In early December, Gorbachev was on his way to the Malta Summit. Before Malta, he visited Italy. This visit is important as Gorbachev once again faced the topic of the unity of the German nation and had to express his view about it. On November 29, in a meeting with Giulio Andreotti in Rome about German nationhood and statehood Italian Prime Minister explicitly stated: “This is one nation, but two states. This is our firm, indeed very firm position” (Gorbachev 2006, 265). Some may not pay attention to the order of topics presented in the sentence, but Andreotti’s arrangement is quite balanced and diplomatic. He explicitly states that Germans are one nation while putting emphasis on the fact that there are two German states.

On December 1, Gorbachev and Andreotti held a joint press conference at Sforza Castle in Milan. While responding to a question from Italian *Il Messaggero* about German reunification, Gorbachev stated: “There are two German states—members of the UN. The people of each of them have the sovereign right to determine their own fate” (Gorbachev 2010b, 519, 206). Here, Gorbachev did not deny or refuse the existence of a single German nation; rather, he

emphasised that each people in both Germanys had the sovereign right to self-determination.

During December 1-3, 1989, Gorbachev attended the US-Soviet summit in Malta. On December 2, during a one-on-one meeting, President Bush made his famous statement for the first time that he was not going to “jump on the wall” (Gorbachev 2010b, 521). In Malta, the Soviets received a clear signal from the Americans that Germany was going to reunify, but the Americans promised to act cautiously. At the December 3 meeting in a larger group, President Bush conveyed to Gorbachev that he hoped the Soviet leader understood the impossibility of expecting them to disapprove of German reunification. He emphasised the importance of maintaining a sense of restraint in their discussions, expressing a desire to avoid any position that might be perceived as provocative (Gorbachev 2010b, 524). Notably, Bush also responded to Gorbachev’s remarks about the significance of the freedom of choice for people in Eastern and Western Europe regarding their preferred systems. Bush asserted that Western values respected the self-determination of individuals and did not advocate for “the imposition of [their] system on Romania, Czechoslovakia, or even the GDR” (Gorbachev 2010b, 235, 524). Even though Bush spoke about the enlargement of the Western space rather than specifically about NATO, this likely represents the first, albeit general, promise which could be placed within the context of the “not one inch eastward” pledge.

The Malta Summit marked the tenth moment concerning the Soviet position on the German question. At this summit, the Soviets were indirectly, yet clearly, signalled that Germany was on the path to reunification. They also received a general indication that the expansion of the Western sphere would remain within the margins of the freedom of choice for peoples.

Two days later, on December 5, Gorbachev and Shevardnadze met with Genscher in Moscow. Their conversation is notable because the Soviet foreign minister expressed concerns about the potential expansion of NATO beyond the GDR. In this tense

meeting, Gorbachev voiced his dissatisfaction with Kohl's ten points, particularly the idea of confederation. He argued that since confederation implied common defence and foreign policy, besides other options, it theoretically left open the possibility of the GDR's future membership in NATO, which was unacceptable to them. Shevardnadze added, "Today this style is applied to the GDR; tomorrow it could be applied to Poland, Czechoslovakia, and then to Austria" (Gorbachev 2006, 277). Shevardnadze may have been mistaken about Austria, but his concerns regarding Poland and Czechoslovakia were indeed realistic, especially considering that, according to currently available data, Eastern Bloc countries, in different ways, expressed their NATO aspirations as early as January 1990.

After the Malta summit, Gorbachev had a meeting scheduled with French President François Mitterrand in Kyiv. On December 6, Gorbachev's advisor, Zagladin, met with Jacques Attali, the aide to Mitterrand. Attali remarked that France did not want the reunification of Germany in any way, although it understood that, ultimately, it would happen (Gorbachev 2006, 285). A similar message was conveyed by President Mitterrand during his meeting with Gorbachev on the same day. He expressed that he was not afraid of German reunification as the German component should become one element of a common European structure (Gorbachev 2006, 287). France was clearly signalling that Germany was going to reunify.

On December 21-22, 1989, Zagladin met with Karl Lammers, the Speaker on disarmament issues for the CSU-CDU Faction in the Bundestag. Lammers was likely the first to tell the Soviets that the FRG would remain in NATO, while also noting that NATO would undergo a process of politicisation—moving away from its military component and transforming into a political organisation (Gorbachev 2006, 294). This notion of NATO's transformation and politicisation later became an integral element of the Soviet-Western agreement on unified German membership in NATO.

Lammers also discussed the potential future of overcoming

military blocs. He suggested that it made sense to consider creating a neutral bloc in Europe, encompassing countries from Sweden to Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary to the neutral Balkans (Gorbachev 2006, 302-302). Although this scenario was quite explicit, it is worth noting that, for the first time, the conversation theoretically involved the creation of a mutual bloc, where some Eastern Bloc and communist countries would join a unified Germany and Sweden. The Zagladin-Lammers meeting marks the eleventh moment of the Soviet position.

From the fall of the Wall until this point, Western leaders had forewarned the Soviets that Germany was going to reunify. Subsequent correspondences indicate that the Soviets understood this message well and recognised that reunification was inevitable; Hence, the focus of the discussion had shifted to the political-military status of the reunified Germany.

6. REUNIFIED GERMANY: NEUTRAL, NON-ALIGNED, OR PARTIALLY IN NATO?

On the night of January 15, 1990, East Germans streamed into the Stasi headquarters in East Berlin⁵. This event had a devastating effect on the GDR leadership and the state as a whole. Modrow discussed the drastic situation facing the GDR after this development during a meeting with Gorbachev in Moscow on January 30. Similarly, Kohl addressed the issue during his visit to Moscow on February 10, remarking that it could be stated that around January 20, the authority of the GDR government collapsed (Gorbachev 2011a, 597-598, 617). This was the twelfth moment of the Soviet position.

On January 26, a narrow group meeting on the German question took place in the building of the CC CPSU, where Soviet leadership recognised that German reunification was inevitable. Soviet KGB chief Vladimir Kryuchkov suggested the need to gradually prepare their people for this reunification, while Soviet Prime Minister

Nikolai Ryzhkov acknowledged that they could not preserve the GDR (Gorbachev 2011a, 595-596). In discussing the future military status of a reunified Germany, Gorbachev explicitly stated that “nobody should expect that a united Germany will join NATO” (Gorbachev 2011a, 192). He also cautioned that it was crucial to work with the other socialist countries, warning that if they abandoned them, those countries would be picked up by others (Gorbachev 2011a, 194) - although not clarified, there is practically no way he had anything other than NATO in mind. Here, Gorbachev also mentioned that the GDR was “the special case”, meaning that its disintegration from the Eastern bloc was inevitable. “Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Hungary [...] will suffer, but they cannot go far”. And “Poland is a special case [...] Poland, both economically and politically, and historically, does not depend on us” (Gorbachev 2011a, 192-193). We leave it up to the reader to decide what Gorbachev’s expectations were regarding the process of decomposition of the Warsaw Pact in the near future. This was the thirteenth moment of the Soviet position.

On January 30, Gorbachev met with the new GDR Prime Minister, Hans Modrow, in Moscow. Modrow informed Gorbachev that the concept of one nation in two states was no longer on the agenda and that reunification was inevitable (Gorbachev 2006, 315). He presented Gorbachev his cabinet’s concept for German unification, which outlined a long-term process supporting confederalization and military neutrality⁶. Both leaders agreed to support the long-term reunification process by advocating for military neutrality. This was the fourteenth moment of the Soviet position. The following day, at the Tutzing Evangelical Academy, Genscher delivered his famous Tutzing formulation, highlighting the increasing desire for the withdrawal of Soviet forces in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, which worried the Soviets. He asserted that NATO should clearly communicate that there would be no eastward expansion toward Soviet borders⁷.

On February 9, 1990, Gorbachev met the US State Secretary James Baker in Moscow. Here, Baker made his famous “not one

inch eastward” assurance. “We understand that not only the Soviet Union, but also other European countries need guarantees that if the United States maintains its presence in Germany within NATO, there will be no extension of jurisdiction or NATO military presence even by an inch in the eastern direction”, said Baker. At the end of their conversation, when Baker asked Gorbachev about his preferred scenario, he offered an option: “a united Germany maintaining ties with NATO, but with the assurance that NATO jurisdiction or troops would not extend east of the current line” (Gorbachev 2011a, 615-616). The phrase “current line” is crucial, as it specifies that Baker is referring to East Germany, not the territories beyond it; as of February 1990, this line aligned with West Germany’s eastern border. While this comment clarifies the territorial issue, the initial remark lacks this specificity. Given the Soviet Union’s concerns about NATO’s potential expansion beyond East Germany at that time, along with Genscher’s Tutzinger formulation and the ongoing fractures within the Warsaw Pact, it is questionable how exactly Baker’s first statement would have been interpreted by the Soviets or what he truly meant. From my perspective, it seems to be a general promise of no NATO expansion beyond East Germany, but this is debatable. This was the fifteenth moment of the Soviet position.

A day later, on February 10, Gorbachev met with the German Chancellor in Moscow. Kohl clearly stated that the FRG had no intention of neutrality (Gorbachev 2011a, 618). During this meeting, Gorbachev suggested a new option: “Nonalignment. India, China — these are the countries that belong to this status! This is not neutrality” (Gorbachev 2011a, 275). He also spoke about the option of nonalignment for a unified Germany in a telephone call with Modrow two days later (Gorbachev 2011a, 280). This was the sixteenth moment of the Soviet position. At the February 10 meeting, Kohl also addressed the issue of no NATO enlargement: “I believe that NATO should not expand its sphere of action [...] I correctly understand the security interests of the Soviet Union”. Considering the Tutzinger formulation and the internal context within

the Soviet Union, as well as the ongoing process of deconstruction of the Warsaw Pact, I believe Kohl meant NATO expansion to the east in general, which, of course, included the territory of the GDR (but was not exclusively concerning it) (Gorbachev 2011a, 275).

On February 12, 1990, Zagladin spoke with Condoleezza Rice, who was President Bush's advisor on Soviet and Eastern European affairs at the time. Rice explicitly stated that the primary guarantee for the "normal" development of a unified Germany was its membership in NATO. She made it clear that the United States viewed NATO as the foundation of its presence in Europe, emphasising that "we do not intend to withdraw from Europe". Rice also noted that NATO was evolving and would continue to change in the future (a process that ultimately reached the NATO London Declaration in July 1990 and the CFE Treaty in November 1990) (Gorbachev 2006, 365). Here Soviets were clearly told that the unified Germany was going to remain in NATO; neutrality or nonalignment was not an option. This was the seventeenth moment of the Soviet position.

The formal establishment of the 2+4 mechanism at the opening of the Ottawa Open Skies Conference, held from February 12 to 14, 1990, and attended by the foreign ministers of NATO, the Warsaw Pact, and observers from the CSCE, marked the eighteenth moment of the Soviet position.

On February 21, Gorbachev addressed a Pravda correspondent's question about Germany by discussing the transformation of NATO and the WP. He noted that while preliminary conditions for a new security system were emerging, the roles of these alliances remained significant, albeit modified due to reduced military confrontation and increased political cooperation. He emphasised that Germany's reunification should consider the necessity of maintaining the military-strategic balance between the two organisations (Gorbachev 2011a, 319). The Soviet Union's expression of readiness for the transformation of NATO and the WP marked the nineteenth moment of the Soviet position.

On February 28, Gorbachev and Bush spoke on the phone. Bush informed Gorbachev about his recent meeting with Kohl at Camp David (this is the meeting where he famously stated, “We prevailed and they [Soviets] did not. We cannot let the Soviets clutch victory from the jaws of defeat” (Gates 1995, 492)). Bush conveyed that he and Kohl agreed that a united Germany should remain in NATO and that American troops should stay in Europe as long as Europeans desired, but not for much longer. He also stated that they were in favour of a special status for the former territory of East Germany (Gorbachev 2011a, 650-651). It is clear that the primary scenario they discussed at that moment was a special status of the (former) GDR, which included, among other things, the non-expansion of NATO into its territory after reunification. Bush’s proposal for a special status for the territory of the (former) GDR marked the twentieth moment of the Soviet position.

The results of the March 18, 1990, general election in the GDR, where the East German CDU received 40.8% and the SDP - 21.9%, leading to the formation of Lothar de Maizière’s government, marked the twenty-first moment of the Soviet position.

On April 10, 1990, Gorbachev met with British Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd in Moscow. Here the change in Gorbachev’s position regarding unified Germany’s membership in NATO was that now Gorbachev stated that the inclusion of Germany (in general) in NATO was unacceptable (Gorbachev 2011b, 226) - not the inclusion of reunified Germany in NATO in any form (as Gorbachev stated in the March 6, 1990, meeting with the delegation from the GDR (Gorbachev 2011a, 393), or on March 7 while answering questions from Pravda (Gorbachev 2006, 381)). This signalled that the Soviets were ready to discuss a special status of the (former) GDR, while the territory of West Germany would remain in NATO. This marked the twenty-second moment of the Soviet position.

On April 18, 1990, Valentin Falin, the head of the International Department of the CC of the CPSU and successor to Anatoly Dobrynin, wrote a policy brief letter to Gorbachev. Falin wrote that

if Western countries had previously raised the price of concessions regarding the non-expansion of NATO's sphere of activity to the GDR until March⁸, then approximately a month ago, discussions had begun in their circles about how this obligation would not extend in "crisis situations" (Gorbachev 2006, 402). What Falin meant here was the expansion of Articles 5 and 6 of the NATO charter (collective defence responsibility in case of an attack on one member), to the territory of the (former) GDR. Falin was absolutely right - this issue was raised by Western representatives in the forthcoming meetings. Even if the territory of the (former) GDR were to be granted special status, the NATO collective defence umbrella would still cover it during critical situations. This marked the twenty-third moment of the Soviet position.

Falin also wrote about the signals from the WP countries intending to seek future NATO membership: "[there is] the statement from the newly elected Volkskammer of the GDR in favour of Germany's participation in NATO, along with similar statements previously made by the Poles, Hungarians, and Czechoslovaks" (Gorbachev 2006, 403). What Falin could have meant here aligns with insights from Simon Miles, as presented in his 2024 article in the journal *International Security*. According to the sources discussed, in early 1990, the Czechoslovak leadership was vocal about its aspirations for NATO membership. At a January meeting, the Czechoslovak delegation, at the meeting of young diplomats and scientists of WP member states in Sofia, dismissed the notion of "natural common interests" with the Soviet Union, instead aligning with other Eastern European nations that viewed NATO as essential for a unified Europe. Following a visit to NATO headquarters in February, Czechoslovakia's Foreign Minister Jiří Dienstbier noted that NATO was crucial for ensuring security for both reunified Germany and former WP members (Miles 2024, 51-85)⁹.

On April 29, 1990, Gorbachev met the new head of the GDR government, Lothar de Maizière, in Moscow. Here, Gorbachev discussed another option for the military status of the unified

Germany - dual membership in NATO and the WP (Gorbachev 2011b, 374-375). Maizière replied that the GDR leadership did not consider the consolidation of a unified Germany's membership in NATO as obligatory, advocating instead for a policy promoting the dissolution of military blocs, including NATO. Maizière proposed a particular model for the (former) GDR's special status. He stated that there should be no NATO troops in this territory, and the forces that previously constituted the national army of the GDR should be technically affiliated with the WP and under no circumstances should be connected to NATO military structures (Gorbachev 2006, 417). This meeting marked the twenty-fourth moment of the Soviet position.

On May 4, 1990, Chernyaev wrote a report letter to Gorbachev. The letter is Chernyaev's report on the May 3 Politburo meeting. There is no stenogram of that meeting available in the published materials, only Chernyaev's report letter and his notes taken during the May 3 meeting. In the letter Chernyaev wrote that it was clear Germany was going to remain in NATO (since later Gorbachev ceased to propose the idea of unified Germany's dual membership in NATO-WP and expressed support for the French model, Chernyaev likely aimed to convey that unified Germany would fully join NATO, and that the Soviets had no real tools to prevent it. Thus, he argued that in such a situation, it was better for the Soviets to accept this flow of events now rather than initially disagree and ultimately concede later. Chernyaev used an allegory of a passenger trying to catch the train: "Why should we chase after a departing train when we obviously have no chance to board it? And what if we arrive only to find ourselves in the middle of the train?" He suggested that if Gorbachev accepted Germany's NATO membership as inevitable and supported it, they could still remain at the forefront of the process. Otherwise, if they were late, they would likely end up not at the front but somewhere in the middle. He also wrote that the assumptions that the reunification of Germany and the possible subsequent accession of Poland to NATO would bring the borders of the bloc closer to the Soviet

borders were irrelevant (Gorbachev 2006, 424-425). It seems that during the May 3 Politburo meeting, members discussed such scenarios.

Chernyaev recorded in his diary that during the May 3 meeting, Gorbachev delivered a steely speech, insisting, “Do not let Germany into NATO and that’s that! I will risk breaking the Vienna negotiations if it comes to that”. He noted that a document outlining this position had been signed by Shevardnadze, Yakovlev, Yazov, and Kryuchkov; Chernyaev also captured Ligachev’s alarmist cry of “NATO is getting close to our borders!”¹⁰ It becomes clear from observing the subsequent negotiations that Gorbachev followed Chernyaev’s advice. Realising that the Soviets were unable to outpace the West, Gorbachev chose to join them to maintain the status of the winner. This explains why the Soviets ultimately accepted the status quo, which risked NATO’s further eastward expansion beyond the (former) GDR territory, despite being aware of such risks and without receiving any legal promise of NATO non-enlargement. This was the twenty-fifth moment—very decisive and fundamental—in shaping the Soviet position.

7. REUNIFIED GERMANY IN NATO: SPECIAL TRANSITIONAL AND POST-TRANSITIONAL STATUS

On May 18, 1990, Gorbachev and Shevardnadze met with Baker in Moscow. Baker told Gorbachev and Shevardnadze that the United States wanted a unified Germany to become a member of NATO, not out of fear of the Soviet Union, but because they believed that if Germany were not firmly anchored in European institutions, conditions could arise that might lead to a repetition of historical conflicts (Gorbachev 2006, 438). This assertion raises an intriguing question about U.S. intentions: Was there genuine scepticism regarding Germany’s autonomy, or was this a diplomatic tactic aimed at calming Soviet concerns and securing their approval for full German NATO membership? Here Baker also explicitly stated

that “our policy is not aimed at separating Eastern Europe from the Soviet Union” (Gorbachev 2006, 438). This statement is part of the broader “not one inch eastward” assurance, indicating that Baker was not only focused on the (former) GDR territory but also on the Eastern Bloc beyond the (former) GDR.

Baker outlined the nine offers the U.S. was prepared to make to the USSR regarding Germany, which included, among other things, a reduction in the size of the Bundeswehr, Germany’s commitment not to produce nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons, an agreed transitional period during which NATO forces would not be stationed in the territory of the (former) GDR while Soviet troops remained there, the evolution of NATO to reassess its military strategy and enhance its political role, the unification of Germany to include the territories of the FRG, the GDR, and Berlin, and the transformation of the CSCE into a permanent institution involving European countries, the Soviet Union, and the United States (Gorbachev 2011c, 517-518). This was the twenty-sixth moment of the Soviet position.

On May 25, Gorbachev met Mitterrand in Moscow. Here, Mitterrand clarified to Gorbachev that, as far as he knew, his US partners, there was no way Americans would agree to dual membership of a unified Germany in both NATO and the WP (Gorbachev 2006, 461). This meeting was significant because Gorbachev, for the first time, mentioned an alternative option for Germany’s NATO membership—the French model—whereby a unified Germany would join the political organisation of NATO but not its military structures¹¹. Mitterrand deemed this option crucial, stating that “this is a key moment”, to which Gorbachev responded that Mitterrand was the first to whom he presented it (Gorbachev 2011c, 133, 535). This was the twenty-seventh moment of the Soviet position.

From May 29 to June 5, 1990, Gorbachev was on his state visit to Canada and the USA. On May 31, he met President Bush at the White House, where they further solidified the points presented by Baker in Moscow two weeks earlier. An additional agreement

between the two leaders was that the superpowers would respect any choice a unified Germany made regarding its military status. Therefore, the foundation of unified Germany's military alignment was to be determined by its own choice, rather than being imposed by the superpowers (Gorbachev 2011c, 542). While it was unlikely that Germany would choose not to join NATO, the political-diplomatic framing of this decision satisfied all parties, including the Soviets. This was the twenty-eighth moment of the Soviet position.

On June 6-7, the Warsaw Pact Political Consultative Committee had their 24th meeting in Moscow¹². At this meeting held at the "Oktyabrskaya" hotel in Moscow, a decision was made to dissolve the military structures of the Warsaw Pact¹³. This was the twenty-ninth moment of the Soviet position.

On his way back from the USA, Gorbachev visited London and met British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher on June 8. Here, Gorbachev's rhetoric regarding the American position has notably changed. He presented himself as someone who understood the American perspective and the circumstances behind their support for the unified Germany's membership in NATO, stating that without this, "the political influence of the USA on the continent will significantly decrease". He also remarked, "Nothing in the world will go well if we do not cooperate with the United States in all areas". This discourse indicated that Gorbachev was agreeing to the U.S. proposal (Gorbachev 2011c, 306-307). This meeting is also important since Gorbachev proposed a new model for unified Germany's membership in NATO, as well as for other countries (I believe he had in mind other WP countries that might want to join NATO later): "I want to [...] create yet another model [of NATO membership] [...] The reform of NATO and the Warsaw Pact [...] would lead to the possibility that any state could join one of these organisations. Perhaps someone else will want to join NATO? [...] A transitional period is necessary for the process of forming European security structures, during which the troops of four powers will remain on the territory of this country". He told Thatcher that the Soviets were going to develop a sufficiently strong

concept on this matter and that they would share it with her (Gorbachev 2011c, 309). This marked the thirtieth moment of the Soviet position.

On July 5-6, 1990, NATO issued a Declaration on a Transformed North Atlantic Alliance by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council—commonly known as the London declaration—which, among other things, aimed at changing NATO’s military strategy¹⁴. At the press conference following the meeting, President Bush announced that NATO was no longer a threat to the Soviet Union (Gorbachev 2012, 549). A week later, in a meeting with Gorbachev in Moscow on July 14, NATO’s Secretary General Manfred Wörner assured Gorbachev that the London declaration was not mere propaganda but a very serious document, indicating that they had decided to change their military strategy. He mentioned that he had set up a special group consisting of political and military officials that would develop the details concerning changes in military and nuclear strategy. “We are seeking ways out of confrontation and transitioning into a new era of cooperation”, mentioned Wörner (Gorbachev 2012, 549-550). The London declaration marked the thirty-first moment that influenced the Soviet position.

On July 15, Gorbachev met Kohl in Moscow. In line with the agreements made between Gorbachev and the American leadership, they expressed their mutual agreement on a 3–4-year transitional period for the presence of Soviet troops in the (former) GDR following reunification (Gorbachev 2012, 553). Gorbachev clarified that during the transition period after reunification, while all of Germany would become a *de jure* NATO member, the territory of the (former) GDR would, *de facto*, remain under the sphere of influence of the Warsaw Pact. After this transitional period, he stated, “the question will lose its sharpness” (Gorbachev 2012, 253). These words are significant, as they suggest that Gorbachev was more concerned about the ‘sharpness’ of unified German membership in NATO—especially given the potential opposition from the people and conservative leadership in the USSR—rather

than the outcome itself. Now it was important to settle the issue relatively calmly, and later the matter would lose its sharpness. This aligns with the concept of KGB chief Kryuchkov's suggestion during the January 26, 1990, Politburo meeting about gradually preparing the Soviet people for German reunification - This time, the Soviets would gradually accustom their people to the idea of a unified Germany's membership in NATO. This was the thirty-second moment of the Soviet position.

Final oral agreements on the German question were clarified and achieved the next day, on July 16, in Arkhyz, North Caucasus. Here, Gorbachev, Shevardnadze, Kohl and Genscher agreed that the total sovereignty of Germany would be restored immediately after reunification. During a transitional period of three to four years, Soviet troops would remain stationed in the territory of the (former) GDR, after which they would withdraw. Meanwhile, no NATO troops would enter the (former) GDR - only German Bundeswehr troops, which were not under NATO command. Additionally, U.S., British, and French troops would remain in Berlin during this transitional period, with their numbers unchanged and no nuclear armaments present. NATO's collective defence articles 5 and 6 would apply immediately after reunification¹⁵. The size of unified Germany's military would be capped at 370,000 soldiers. After the transitional period, when Soviet troops left the (former) GDR, U.S., U.K., and French troops would also withdraw from Berlin, and no foreign troops would be stationed in the (former) GDR territory. Only German troops under NATO command (and theoretically those not under NATO command) would remain, with no nuclear armaments allowed (Gorbachev 2006, 507-524). These agreements, reached by Gorbachev, Shevardnadze, Kohl, and Genscher in Arkhyz, formed the basis of the Treaty on the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany, signed by the 2+4 powers on September 12, 1990, in Moscow. This marked the final Thirty-third moment of the Soviet position. In Arkhyz, they established their conclusive stance on the German question, which was incorporated into the Two Plus Four Agreement in Moscow.

On September 12, 1990, when the 2+4 parties signed the Treaty on the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany¹⁶, the Soviet position's five-and-a-half-year odyssey on the German question finally reached its final harbour.

8. FINAL CHORDS

On September 20, 1990, Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze addressed the Committee on International Affairs of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR regarding the Two Plus Four Treaty, evaluating how this agreement aligned with the state and political interests of the USSR. This speech is significant for two main reasons. First, from a historical perspective, it represents a kind of inverted Versailles or Potsdam policy speech. The Treaty of Versailles and the Potsdam Agreement advocated for the territorial downsizing and division of Germany to ensure security. Shevardnadze argued that the real threat existed as long as Germany remained divided. He asserted that after reunification, this threat disappeared (Gorbachev 2006, 576). According to this logic, division was the source of instability, and reunification corrected it. Second, He emphasised that no agreements, regardless of their quality, could guarantee a state's security if that security lacked internal support. He noted that if negative, destructive tendencies persisted in the country, and if the division of economic, financial, and other state structures continued, no international agreements would be able to provide reliable security and a peaceful life. He pointed out that foreign policy is essentially an extension of domestic policy, which should always be remembered (Gorbachev 2006, 577). This warning precisely describes what happened to the Soviet Union. It illustrates that no matter what oral or written pledges—whether treaty-based or not—a country may receive, these cannot resolve its security issues if the domestic situation deteriorates.

On November 9, 1990, the Soviet Union and the FRG signed several partnership agreements in Bonn: Treaty on Good-

Neighbourliness, Partnership and Cooperation between the FRG and the USSR, Treaty on the Development of Large-Scale Cooperation in the Field of Economy, Industry, Science and Technology; and Agreement on Cooperation in the Labour Field (Gorbachev 2013, 483). On November 19, in the framework of the CSCE Summit meeting in Paris, 22 member states of NATO and the Warsaw Pact signed the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe¹⁷ and published a joint declaration of non-aggression. This long-awaited treaty aimed to establish a framework for the mutual transformation of both alliances and was expected to lead to the creation of a common European security. This arrangement served as one of the security guarantees for the Soviet Union when it agreed to a unified Germany's membership in NATO. It likely also influenced their decision not to demand a treaty-based guarantee against NATO's expansion beyond the (former) GDR. Thus, the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact was one of the major blows to the Soviet house of cards.

On February 25, 1991, at a meeting in Budapest, the Warsaw Pact Political Consultative Committee decided to dissolve the Warsaw Pact. Then, on July 1, 1991, at the Warsaw Pact Summit in Prague, the participants formally dissolved the Pact. In parallel, COMECON was also dissolved (on June 28, 1991). On March 4, 1991, the Supreme Soviet of the USSR ratified the Treaty on the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany, as well as the partnership and cooperation agreements signed with the FRG on November 9 (Gorbachev 2006, 637).

9. CONCLUSION

The position of the Soviet Union on the German question underwent a drastic transformation during the Gorbachev period. If in March 1985, the USSR clearly supported the preservation of the 1970 and 1975 status quo, which, according to their interpretation, meant two German states (while the question of

national unity remained a topic of debate), de facto in mid-July and de jure in September 1990, the Soviets agreed to the conditions outlined in the Two Plus Four Agreement, which solidified not only the reunification of the German nation into one state, but also the full membership of that state in NATO, along with some special transitional and post-transitional arrangements. This article details the microhistory of this five-and-a-half-year odyssey of the Soviet position on the German question, based on Russian-language archival materials from Gorbachev's correspondence published by the Gorbachev Foundation, moving step by step through thirty-three moments of change.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE SOVIET POSITION ON THE GERMAN QUESTION

If, at the beginning, the Soviets debated the national unity of Germany (e.g., with Weizsäcker on July 7, 1987), by December 1987 (during the Gorbachev-Strauss meeting) and October 1988 (during the Gorbachev-Kohl meeting), they had ceased to engage in this debate. They signaled to the Germans the end of the Brezhnev Doctrine during the Gorbachev-Strauss meeting in December 1987 and publicly denounced it during Gorbachev's visit to the FRG in June 1989 (and de facto confirmed by their non-interference when the Wall fell) (In terms of publicity, Gorbachev's December 1988 address to the UN General Assembly was, of course, a turning point). If initially, the Soviet position did not consider reunification of Germany in any form and by any method, during the October 1988 meeting with Kohl, Gorbachev emphasised that it was the methods of the 1940s and 1950s that were unacceptable for reunification. If shortly after the fall of the Wall, the Soviets still questioned and denied the possibility of German reunification, at the end of 1989 and the start of 1990, they eventually became convinced that it was inevitable. If shortly after the fall of the Wall, the Soviet position regarding the potential military status of a reunified Germany did not accept its membership in NATO in any

form, advocating instead for military neutrality, by February 1990, the Soviets proposed a non-aligned status (which differed from neutrality); Later, in April, they suggested Germany's dual membership in NATO and the Warsaw Pact and by May, agreed to total membership under the condition of non-expansion of NATO into the (former) GDR. Also in May 1990, Gorbachev proposed a French membership model for Germany, and by June, a special new model (which required further elaboration). Finally, in July 1990, the Soviets agreed to total unified German membership in NATO, along with special transitional and post-transitional arrangements embedded in the Two Plus Four Treaty.

“NOT ONE INCH EASTWARD” DEBATE AND SOVIET CONCERNS ABOUT NATO’S EASTWARD EXPANSION BEYOND THE GDR

As Gorbachev outlined in his May 1985 meeting with Brandt, if the absorption of socialist countries that NATO was discussing were to become the basis of policy, it would lead to a course for war (it is worth noting that the Soviet-Western transformation had not yet begun at that moment). By May 1988, Gorbachev informed Vogel that Americans were acting from a position of strength, believing they could extract more concessions from ‘Gorbachev and his team’. He found this strategy ineffective, but it underscored Soviet caution. In Malta, Bush assured Gorbachev that Western values respected self-determination and would not impose their system on Romania, Czechoslovakia, or the GDR. Though he emphasised the enlargement of Western space rather than particularly NATO, this likely was the first general promise which could be linked to the “not one inch eastward” pledge. In December 1989, when the Soviets expressed dissatisfaction with Kohl’s Ten Points to Genscher, as, besides other options, it theoretically left open the possibility of the GDR’s future NATO membership, Shevardnadze warned that this approach could also be extended to Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Austria.

In January 1990, Gorbachev warned the Politburo that if socialist countries were abandoned by them, they would likely be picked up by others (although not clarified, there is practically no way he had anything else rather than NATO in mind). He viewed Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, and Hungary as problematic but likely to survive, while the GDR and Poland were considered “special cases”. In February 1990, Baker assured the Soviets that if a unified Germany joined NATO, its jurisdiction and troops would not extend to the (former) GDR territory. He also generally discussed the non-expansion of NATO to the East. A day later, Chancellor Kohl spoke about NATO’s non-expansion, considering Soviet security interests. Given Genscher’s Tutzing formulation—of which Baker was also well aware—there is little chance that Kohl meant only the (former) GDR territory and not eastern territories beyond it. In April, Falin warned Gorbachev that Poles, Hungarians and Czechoslovaks made statements intending to seek future NATO membership. In early May, the risks of Poland’s accession to NATO were discussed in the Soviet Politburo. Also, in May 1990, Baker explicitly stated to the Soviets that US policy was not aimed at separating Eastern Europe from the Soviet Union. In June 1990, during a conversation with Thatcher, while proposing a new membership model for Germany, Gorbachev mentioned that someone else, besides the GDR, might want to join NATO in the future. Though he did not specify, the context suggests he was referring to NATO membership aspirations to the east.

The “not one inch eastward” assurance was communicated to the Soviets in various ways by Western leaders during the negotiations on Germany. At times, it referred specifically to the (former) GDR territory, while at other times it clearly encompassed the Eastern Bloc beyond the (former) GDR, and in some other instances, it resembled a general promise of NATO’s future non-enlargement to the east. This was not a written, treaty-based commitment—binding or non-binding—but rather an oral political promise made by specific Western leaders to specific Soviet leaders. Nevertheless, as we see, oral political promises can have

consequences too at different times and with different leaders - we cannot undo this¹⁸. The reasons why such elements are instrumentalised deserve further research and analysis, but it is indeed a fact that this particular assurance has been made, and now it is instrumentalised. What our research aimed to clarify is whether the “not one inch eastward” assurance, in addition to applying to the (former) GDR, also extended to the territories and states further east. Our findings confirmed that it did.

WHY ACCEPT THE *STATUS QUO* THAT RISKS NATO’S FURTHER EASTWARD EXPANSION? - CHERNYAEV’S TRAIN ALLEGORY

As our article clarified, the Soviets were aware of the risks of NATO’s further eastward expansion beyond the (former) GDR territory, yet they did not demand any legal promise of NATO non-enlargement to the east. The question now to be answered is: why? The key determinant here, we believe, is reflected in Chernyaev’s allegory of a passenger trying to catch a train (which we will refer to as the *Chernyaev Train Allegory*), which he presented to Gorbachev in his May 1990 letter, while trying to convince him to accept unified Germany’s total membership in NATO and support it. Since he was convinced that this would happen regardless of Soviet support or disapproval, he questioned the wisdom of chasing after a departing train when there was little chance of boarding it, or, in the best-case scenario, arriving only to find themselves in the middle. He advocated for full Soviet support of Germany’s NATO membership, as this option would allow the Soviet Union to remain in the locomotive—at the forefront of the entire process. Respectively, the Soviets preferred to go along with the flow of events rather than initially disagree and ultimately concede later. Agreeing to *Chernyaev’s Train Allegory*, by recognising that they could not outpace the West, Gorbachev chose to align with them to maintain the status of a winner.

Besides, as was indicated by the NATO London declaration and the CFE Treaty, NATO and the WP were on their way to a

significant transformation and no longer viewed themselves as enemies. Gorbachev expected this process to evolve into a common European security architecture, ultimately leading to the dissolution of the blocs to form a unified security framework from Lisbon to Vladivostok. But as Shevardnadze noted, foreign policy was merely an extension of domestic policy, and no international agreements were to guarantee a state's security without internal cohesion and stability. Thus, the breakup of Gorbachev's Soviet Union may have denied the world the opportunity to build a common security architecture.

NOTES

1. During the negotiations regarding Germany, the GDR was still in existence, but the discussions addressed the future of its territory. Thus, the negotiations focused on how to treat a state's territory that existed at the time but would soon cease to exist, becoming a 'former' territory. To reflect this duality, I chose to place the word 'former' in brackets—'(former) GDR'.
2. When discussing the “not one inch eastward” assurance, it is crucial to understand that there was neither a legal nor a binding promise. This is absolutely clear by now—at least from the legal and historical data available at the moment—thus, this question is not one of international law. However, even if there had been a legally binding promise, it might have become subject to *clausula rebus sic stantibus* (a clause in international conventions that provides for the unenforceability of a treaty due to fundamentally changed circumstances) - Jack Matlock, the US ambassador to Moscow (1987-1991), wrote in his post on his personal website - “When the Soviet Union collapsed, the ‘circumstances’ of 1989 and 1990 changed radically” (see: <https://jackmatlock.com/2014/04/nato-expansion-was-there-a-promise/> (access: 04.08.2025)). The “not one inch eastward” assurance debate concerns: a) whether there was an oral promise made during the negotiations, and b) if so, whether it pertained only to the (former) GDR territory or also to eastward territories beyond it. While this debate may not be part of international law, it remains a significant aspect of, inter alia, international politics. Treaties, for example, have, inter alia, legal consequences, whereas political promises, though not legally binding, have consequences too. I am not in a position to precisely argue or test whether this particular causality is the main explanation for Russia's post-2007 policy in the post-Soviet neighborhood (it is very likely that this is

- merely a tool of the Kremlin's propaganda), however, I firmly argue that promises in political-diplomatic negotiations can have very significant consequences; thus—promises matter and here we are.
3. For more details about the opposition in the GDR, see the book by the founders of the East German Social Democratic Party (SDP)—Markus Meckel and Martin Gutzeit—which includes annotated documents: Meckel, Markus and Gutzeit, Martin. 1994. *Opposition in der DDR. Zehn Jahre kirchliche Friedensarbeit – kommentierte Quellentexte*. Köln: Bund-Verlag.
 4. For the Russian translation of Helmut Kohl's address to the Bundestag on November 28, 1989, see: Galkin, Alexandr and Chernyaev, Anatoly (eds.). 2006. *Mikhail Gorbachev and the German Question*. Moscow: Ves Mir. pp. 254-263.
 5. For details about the storming of the Stasi headquarters in Berlin, listen to the BBC World Service's "The History Hour" podcast at: <https://www.bbc.com/audio/play/w3csypzt> (access: 07.08.2025).
 6. For the Russian translation of Hans Modrow's concept: "For Germany, a single homeland (a concept for discussion on the path to German unity)" see: Galkin, Alexandr and Chernyaev, Anatoly (eds.). 2006. *Mikhail Gorbachev and the German Question*. Moscow: Ves Mir. pp. 325-326.
 7. For the original German version of Genscher's Tutzinger Speech, see: Genscher, Hans-Dietrich. 1990. "Zur deutschen Einheit im europäischen Rahmen". Tutzinger Blätter 2: 3-13 (https://das-blaettchen.de/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Tutzinger-Blaetter-2_1990.pdf access: 07.08.2025).
 8. This source further confirms that during February and March 1990, the primary proposed Western scenario in Soviet-Western negotiations regarding the military status of a unified Germany was a special status of the (former) GDR, which involved the non-expansion of NATO to its territory.
 9. In his article, Miles presents new evidence from Czech, German, Hungarian, Polish, and Romanian archives, revealing that between 1989 and 1991, non-Soviet Warsaw Pact members significantly influenced events at the end of the Cold War. They recognised that their ties with the USSR, defined by the Warsaw Pact, would hinder their success in the post-Cold War era, leading them to decide to dismantle the alliance. According to this data, by July 1990, Czechoslovak, Hungarian, and Polish delegations expressed a desire to exit the Warsaw Pact and sought to build closer relations with NATO.
 10. For Chernyaev's notes in Russian, see the National Security Archive's publication titled "Diary of A.S. Chernyaev for the year 1990" at: <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/25163-document-19-dnevnik-aschernyaeva-za-1990-god> (access: 07.08.2025).
 11. This model was a result of the Gaullist policy and was installed after 1966.

12. For a list of multilateral meetings of the Soviet Bloc from 1947 to 1991 and their results, see the chronology compiled and edited by Linda Richter and Csaba Békés, available on the website of the Cold War History Research Centre, Budapest: http://www.coldwar.hu/chronologies/complete_meetings.html (access: 08.08.2025).
13. For more details about dissolution of the military structures of the Warsaw Pact, see the online article prepared by the Historical and Documentary Department of the Russian Foreign Ministry: https://idd.mid.ru/informational_materials/k-25-letiyu-rospuska-voennykh-struktur-organizatsii-varshavskogo-dogovora/ (access: 08.08.2025).
14. For the text of the London Declaration, see: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_23693.htm (access: 08.08.2025).
15. Valentin Falin informed Gorbachev about this aspect in his policy brief letter as early as April 18, 1990.
16. For the French, English, German, and Russian language versions of the Treaty on the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany, see: https://www.cvce.eu/en/collections/unit-content/-/unit/df06517b-babc-451d-baf6-a2d4b19c1c88/efe51364-e699-4d53-92ff-fe24f37e4d40/Resources#5db0b251-c5bf-4f5a-b5d0-2047f829c19a_en&overlay (access: 08.08.2025).
17. For the English-language text of the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, see: <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/4/9/14087.pdf> (access: 08.08.2025).
18. Notably, the post-Soviet withdrawal arrangement in the Treaty on the Final Settlement regarding Germany (see Article 5.3), particularly the non-deployment of foreign armed forces in the former GDR territory, was tacitly upheld until October 2024. According to a 2020 article in *Zeit Magazine*, only Bundeswehr troops were stationed in the former GDR, with no foreign NATO forces present (see: Palm, Johannes. 2020. „Standorte ausländischen Militärs”. *Zeit Magazin*. <https://www.zeit.de/zeit-magazin/2020/03/militaer-standorte-usa-grossbritannien-frankreich-deutschlandkarte> (access: 09.08.2025). But from October 2024 after opening the Bundeswehr's new tactical headquarters for monitoring the Baltic Sea region in Rostock (Commander Task Force (CTF) Baltic) which besides the Bundeswehr harbors naval forces of NATO from Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Great Britain, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, and Sweden, this status quo has changed (see the information from *tagesschau* at: <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/innenpolitik/bundeswehr-hauptquartier-rostock-100.html> (access: 09.08.2025)).

REFERENCES

- Галкин, Александр и Черняев, Анатолий (ред.). 2006. *Михаил Горбачев и германский вопрос. Сб. документов, 1986-1991*. Москва: Вест Мир [Galkin, Alexandr and Chernyaev, Anatoly (eds.). 2006. *Mikhail Gorbachev and the German Question. Collection of documents, 1986-1991*. Moscow: Ves Mir].
- Gates, Robert. 1995. *From the Shadows*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Горбачев, М. С. 2008а. *Собрание сочинений. Том 2. Март 1984 – Октябрь 1985*. Вест Мир, Москва [Gorbachev, Mikhail. 2008а. *Collected works. Vol.2. March 1984 – October 1985*. Moscow: Ves Mir].
- Горбачев, М.С. 2008b. *Собрание сочинений. Том 3. Октябрь 1985 - Апрель 1986*. Вест Мир, Москва [Gorbachev, Mikhail. 2008b. *Collected works. Vol.3. October 1985 – April 1986*. Moscow: Ves Mir].
- Горбачев, М.С. 2008с. *Собрание сочинений. Том 4. Апрель - Октябрь 1986*. Вест Мир, Москва [Gorbachev, Mikhail. 2008с. *Collected works. Vol.4. April – October 1986*. Moscow: Ves Mir].
- Горбачев, М.С. 2008d. *Собрание сочинений. Том 7. Май - Октябрь 1987*. Вест Мир, Москва [Gorbachev, Mikhail. 2008d. *Collected works. Vol.7. May – October 1987*. Moscow: Ves Mir].
- Горбачев, М.С. 2009а: *Собрание сочинений. Том 9. Ноябрь 1987 - Март 1988*. Вест Мир, Москва [Gorbachev, Mikhail. 2009а. *Collected works. Vol.9. November 1987 – March 1988*. Moscow: Ves Mir].
- Горбачев, М.С. 2009b. *Собрание сочинений. Том 12. Сентябрь — Декабрь 1988*. Вест Мир, Москва [Gorbachev, Mikhail. 2009b. *Collected works. Vol.12. September – December 1988*. Moscow: Ves Mir].
- Горбачев, М.С. 2010а. *Собрание сочинений. Том 14. Апрель — Июнь 1989*. Вест Мир, Москва [Gorbachev, Mikhail. 2010а. *Collected works. Vol.14. April – June 1989*. Moscow: Ves Mir].
- Горбачев, М.С. 2010b. *Собрание сочинений. Том 17. Ноябрь – Декабрь 1989*. Вест Мир, Москва [Gorbachev, Mikhail. 2010b. *Collected works. Vol.17. November – December 1989*. Moscow: Ves Mir].
- Горбачев, М.С. 2011а. *Собрание сочинений. Том 18. Декабрь 1989 - Март 1990*. Вест Мир, Москва [Gorbachev, Mikhail. 2011а. *Collected works. Vol.18. December 1989 – March 1990*. Moscow: Ves Mir].
- Горбачев, М.С. 2011b. *Собрание сочинений. Том 19. Март – Май 1990*. Вест Мир, Москва [Gorbachev, Mikhail. 2011b. *Collected works. Vol.19. March - May 1990*. Moscow: Ves Mir].
- Горбачев, М.С. 2011с. *Собрание сочинений. Том 20. Май – Июнь 1990*. Вест Мир, Москва [Gorbachev, Mikhail. 2011с. *Collected works. Vol.20. May - June 1990*. Moscow: Ves Mir].

- Горбачев, М.С. 2012. *Собрание сочинений. Том 21. Июль – Август 1990*. Весь Мир, Москва [Gorbachev, Mikhail. 2012. *Collected works. Vol.21. July - August 1990*. Moscow: Ves Mir].
- Горбачев, М.С. 2013. *Собрание сочинений. Том 23. Ноябрь – Декабрь 1990*. Весь Мир, Москва [Gorbachev, Mikhail. 2013. *Collected works. Vol.23. November – December 1990*. Moscow: Ves Mir].
- Meckel, Markus. 2020. *Zu wandeln die Zeiten. Erinnerungen*. Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt.