



Ernst Barlach, The Book Reader

At the turn of the year

How did it come so far ?

I.

What happened?

80 years ago, the largest war in world history with tens of millions of victims came to an end. Already in July **1945** Harry S. *Truman*, Josef *Stalin* and Winston *Churchill* met in Potsdam to regulate the rights of the victorious powers and to discuss the future of defeated Germany. The United Nations was founded on October 24. They were intended to prevent a repetition of the catastrophe of the Second World War by bringing all nations to an agreement on lasting peace and a value-based international policy. In Nuremberg, the trial against the main war criminals was opened in November 1945. The USSR, the USA, Great Britain and France divided Germany and the city of Berlin into occupation zones. In the German cities, the citizens began to clear rubble and ashes in the ruins.

The Berlin blockade of **1948** marked the beginning of a decades-long cold war between East and West. In **1949**, NATO, the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic were founded.

The first war with the participation of the former Allies after 1945, broke out in Korea on June 25, **1950**. South Korea was supported by the USA, North Korea by the USSR and the People's Republic of China - the first proof that the alliance of the world war powers USA and USSR had come to an end.

What no one had thought possible after the construction of the Wall in Berlin in **1961**, the lifting of the Iron Curtain between East and West, 40 years of the GDR, and the division of Germany, came to pass in **1989**. The Wall fell, and Germany was **reunited in 1990**.

From 1985 onwards, the former president of the USSR *Gorbachev* had finally led the USSR to its end in *1991 with his ideas of glasnost ("openness and transparency") and perestroika ("transformation")*.

Many clever people at the time considered this to be *"the end of history"* (Francis *Fukuyama*) because the idea of liberal democracy of the West, seemed to have won a final victory over the communist idea. The hope that the communist states would join this order was naïve, great and wrong. In the end, it seemed that we were only concerned with a *"clash of civilizations"* (Samuel P. *Huntington*).

Many have warned against assuming that eternal peace has now occurred - including me. For the West had lost its enemy, but new threats to security and peace were growing and stronger: international organized crime and terror. Then Islamist terror of various forms began to shake the world, culminating on September 11, **2001**, in New York.

On September 25, **2001**, Russian President *Vladimir Putin* gave a speech to the Bundestag and Bundesrat in Berlin, in which he stated a "unity of European culture," claimed that *"the spirit*

of the ideas of democracy and freedom had taken hold of the vast majority of Russian citizens" and that European integration was supported by Russia. Russia is a "*friendly European country*" whose main goal is "*stable peace on the continent*". He held out the prospect of democracy, freedom and the rule of law for his country and propagated peaceful cooperation with the West. The German media and politicians were enthusiastic and - relieved.

A few years later, after another speech in Germany, at the Munich Security Conference on February 10, **2007**, this turned out to be a deception. *Putin* put his cards on the table at the time: the rejection of a "unipolar world order", criticism of NATO's eastward expansion and too close political alignment of the EU with the USA, accusations against the OSCE.

Russia fought wars in Chechnya between 1994 and 1996 and from 1999 to 2009, was in Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989, and attacked Georgia in August 2008. In **2014**, *Putin annexed* Crimea... On February 24, **2022**, *Putin launched* the attack on Ukraine, which almost led to the fall of Kyiv, but was ultimately prevented by the resilience of the Ukrainian people.

With his second term in office on January 20, 2025, the 47th President of the United States began the fundamental transformation of society in the United States and his country's international relations according to his "America first!" program. His commitment to the EU and NATO is unclear. His relationship with Russia and Ukraine is volatile.

II.

The current situation

After a short phase of global cooperation on many important human issues, such as the economy, climate protection, the fight against hunger and disease, respect for the territorial integrity of states and the containment of the causes of flight on our planet, the **global political situation** has fallen into a state of global mistrust, the dominance of national interests at almost any price, and the questioning of national sovereignty and the value of international cooperation. This is especially true for the major global political players, such as the USA and the People's Republic of China and the self-proclaimed "world power" Russia. They form the core of an "axis of autocrats" (Anne *Appelbaum*), to which at least Iran, but also India and Turkey and some states in Asia and Central and South America, must be assigned.

For years, this development has been linked to an erosion of the value of truth and truthfulness in the international and national environment. The lie is back. With power. As power. How it destroys democracy, Roman *Deininger* and Kai *Strittmatter* describe (Sueddeutsche Zeitung No. 228 of 4./5.10.2025, page 13ff.).

The world order is in disarray; it is out of joint. Its previous basis, the Charter of the United Nations, is losing more and more acceptance because its members define and interpret the values, obligations and goals enshrined in it, in very different ways and relativise them in their concrete political actions. This applies in particular to the obligations,

- To treaties and other sources of international law (preamble),
- To refrain from threatening or using force against the territorial integrity or political independence of a state (Art. 2 no. 4),

- To not to endanger international peace, security and justice (Art. 2 No. 3) and
- To the use of armed force only in the common interest (preamble).

Thus, today, the "world situation" and the "world history" no longer arise as the result of the policies of one or more great powers, but as the result of egocentric, often violent policies of countless states, nations and regions on this earth.

This has led to almost 30 wars and armed conflicts worldwide. The number of refugees worldwide has risen to over one million people. Over 800 million people have to suffer from hunger. But the United Nations will have to continue to face those problems unsuccessfully as long as the blockade of joint actions by the veto powers is possible and some of the previous main donors dry up the UN aid organizations financially.

The **state of the European Union** is, of course, decisively influenced by global developments, but ultimately determined by its own constitution and policies. The President of the European Commission correctly described this in her State of the Union of 10 September 2025:

"Today's world is merciless... Europe is fighting - for an intact continent in peace. For a free and independent Europe ... for our values and our democracies... This is a battle for our future. There is "no more place and no time for nostalgia"... Therefore, "a new Europe must emerge". This "new Europe" must be able to "take our defence and security into its own hands, ... to have control over the technologies and energy sources".

Some critics of the EU will object that this will not be possible within the framework of the current treaties and the current "state of mind" in the Council of the EU. But this is wrong. Since its founding, the EU has proven that it is the only supranational entity that always manages to find a consensus, or at least a viable compromise, among its 27 members to solve the most difficult problems.

But it must be admitted that the EU's self-assessment of its contributions to solving global problems, is too modest and that is why the appreciation of third parties in this area is also restrained.

The situation in Germany, the largest and economically strongest EU Member State and still the third largest economy in the world, is decisively determined by the global and European framework conditions and one's own actions and omissions.

Even in the European model country of democracy, the latent perversion of this form of government has long since begun. Parts of the political process conceal their true political goals with supposedly good intentions and put them as an endless loop on social media. A point, so became the refusal. The militarily necessary in Ukraine's struggle for freedom, sold as prudence or prevention of escalations.

For decades, we have spent billions of euros to take care of suffering regions on our planet and neglected to take a critical look at the state of our country.

The "economic miracle" that we experienced mainly because of the courage and confidence of the war generation, and which led to decades of growth, social security and prosperity, has led

us to believe in miracles. And that was fatal. Because we have not noticed or did not want to accept that the basic data of our country and the economic world around us, have changed massively:

Our country is at risk by a threatening degree of deindustrialization, as once happened to the United Kingdom in the 1980s. The cost of production is too high for many reasons, such as energy prices, bureaucracy, dependence on suppliers of raw materials. The capacities for production are limited by the lack of young skilled workers.

Blinded by "Made in Germany", we did not want to see the emerging new industrial revolution: less coal, less steel, less oil and gas, 3D-printing instead of machine tools, electromobility instead of combustion engines.

Our false, historical image of China has led us to expect that this country with its proud citizens will only be the "workbench" for our end-products for the foreseeable future. Today, German carmakers in China are learning how to build cheap e-cars.

Our once impressive infrastructure is "getting on in years" in all areas and has slipped out of the attention of the responsible authorities in many areas. Hundreds of billions of euros were invested in the 1990s, especially in road networks, particularly in the new federal states. However, thousands of motorway bridges now have to be renovated or renewed nationwide. Many experts and troubled passengers consider Deutsche Bahn needs restructuring because of the dilapidated rail network and the resulting delays.

Since reunification, our country's ability to defend itself has been reduced in a conscious and deliberate manner within the wrong belief of the existence of eternal peace: recruitment has been suspended, troop numbers have been reduced, barracks have been closed, and the operational capability of weapon systems has no longer been carefully checked.

After the realisation, at least among military experts, that again we have an enemy, the Social Democrats, as coalition partners, have prevented a change of course in the long term - to the detriment of the Bundeswehr and our defence capability, and in their unshakable belief in the good relationship with the Russian Federation.

The "Moscow connection" in the SPD played a decisive role in relying for decades on Russia's cost-effective supply of gas and oil - measured by world market prices. The "Nordstream II" project, which was criticized worldwide, was the culmination of this energy policy aberration.

The then Chancellor could not, or did not want, to assert herself against the smaller coalition partner either in the obviously wrong defense policy or in misguided energy policy.

III.

What to do?

In Germany, it is obvious what needs to be done: After Trump's first election as president of the United States, the then chancellor was described as the new leader of the Western world. This was certainly a media exaggeration, but it had a grain of truth. During this time, Germany

was the country with the most stable democracy in the Western Hemisphere. We should now accept this as a mandate, despite the AfD.

If we want to create reliable conditions for the obvious problems to be solved quickly and sustainably, then we must above all do everything we can to strengthen the rule of law democracy in our country. We have to solve the problem that about 25% of our eligible electorate sympathizes with a party that wants a different republic and does not feel bound by the constitutional order of the Basic Law. A "firewall" against this party or even a party ban, will not solve this problem. Only we citizens, the voters, can and must do that.

Perhaps we should follow Walter *Leisner* in his insight from 1978: *"The opposition is also your bearer of significant trust in the state. Anyone who constantly pushes it back, completely excludes it from political decision-making, ultimately imposes the overall basis of citizens' trust"* (*Democracy. Self-destruction of a form of government?* p. 252).

We have the almost clairvoyant admonition of Walter *Leisner* from 1978 ignored to this day: Although we outdo each other in invoking the necessity of fighting for democracy, we do not get to the bottom of the question of why the appreciation for this form of government is eroding. However, this is not a turning away from the idea of the authoritative nature of the will of the people, but rather growing doubts as to whether the parliamentary system that has been practiced for decades today, in an age of social media and the permanent availability of political data of all kinds, is still able to grasp the will of the people even remotely and to introduce it into political processes with the greatest possible authenticity.

We need an everyman's *duty* in our constitution that reduces the probability of a state of emergency within the meaning of Article 20 sec. 4 of the Basic Law, which triggers a *right* of resistance on the part of citizens, and avoids its occurrence and many citizens can shake off the feeling of powerlessness in the democratic process. It could be:

"Everyone is obliged to respect the constitutional order, to protect it and to work for its existence" (Art. 20 sec. 4 sentence 1 GG new).

If we want to maintain the level of our general prosperity and social security, we need above all, significant economic growth again. We will only achieve this if we succeed in fundamentally improving the framework conditions for industrial production and attractive services in our country. This requires that we find the courage to trust those working in the economy to share more responsibility and to relieve them of unnecessary regulations and bureaucracy.

Products "made in Germany" are still in demand worldwide and enjoy a good reputation. And our companies' spending on research and development is increasing, as are the corresponding budgets in the budgets of the federal and state governments. These are good, forward-looking expenditures, which are rewarded, for example, by the increase in trademarks and patent applications.

These are also good prerequisites for a fundamental improvement in the framework conditions for industrial production and attractive services in our country. However, this also requires that we find the courage to trust those working in the economy to share more responsibility and to relieve them of unnecessary regulations.

We must make production-costs in our country internationally competitive again. This applies to energy prices, the level of taxes and access to credit and government support for start-up companies. If we do not succeed, more and more companies will leave our country, and fewer and fewer investors will find Germany attractive.

And we must find a clever balance between our country's participation in the now restricted globalisation and a sufficient degree of independence, or "strategic autonomy", from the supply of raw materials, semi-finished products or specific key products, such as medicines, chips or solar elements.

The institutions of the European Union have recognised that the greatest challenge for the survival and success of the Union in the coming years, will be the fight for a democracy based on the rule of law with fundamental rights in all Member States and at EU level. That is why the European Commission has adopted an "Action Plan for Democracy", and the European Parliament has set up a special Committee on a protective shield for democracy.

In my opinion, this body should also discuss the question of whether it would not be useful to include in the Treaty on European Union a duty on the part of the citizens of the Union "*to respect the democratic order, to protect it and to work for its existence*". (Art. 10 para. 4 new).

The attempts of third states to divide the Union with non-serious promises to individual Member States, are becoming more and more and more brazen. The EU must defend itself against this, including against Member States that sometimes seem to be immune to these attempts. The appropriate instruments are provided by the Treaties.

The idea of European integration is one of the greatest success stories in the history of Europe. We must not allow ourselves to be distracted from this right path, by threats or temptations. Deepening and expansion of the Union must be continued, with a sense of proportion and reason.

But on this path we have to face the changed framework related conditions: We have to avoid dependencies, develop our own strengths and become more capable of acting. This applies in particular to relations with third countries – the United States included. The European continent seems militarily helpless without the USA. But that's not true. Hauke *Friederichs* and Max *Hägler* convincingly demonstrate that there are many companies in the EU that can and will make us more independent of the USA with their technology (Die Zeit of 27. 2. 2015, page 17).

That is why we urgently need to become more capable of acting. It is time for majority decisions in foreign and security policy.

As far as the **global situation** is concerned, I hesitate to answer for the first time in my life, although throughout my career, I often have been faced by coping with problems that seemed unsolvable and by providing professional advice and action that were expected in such situations.

What is certain, is, that this situation cannot be resolved by simply turning a few screws, because countless actors are responsible for it, and they are not open to good advice.

It is unacceptable to agree with prophets who expect a fundamental change in such a situation only through a global catastrophe of any kind. For we live in a time when it is no longer certain whether humanity would be prepared to act collectively in such a situation, or whether it would seek salvation in individual action.

But Jonathan *White* (Die Zeit No. 35 of 15.8.2024, p. 4) is right: "*The power of the future lies in the fact that the present is not permanent*". The actors are changing, the conditions are changing, even if this may not seem likely at the moment.

We must not take refuge in resignation, fear, fatalism or inactive observation because of disorder in the current world order. Christopher *Clark* has described where this "sleepwalking" can lead to in world politics (The Sleepwalkers 2014).

All those who can exert influence on world politics, including Germany and the EU, should not be deterred from continuing to stand up for the values that were agreed upon by the founders of the United Nations in 1945 - even if the devaluation and relativization of these values does not make this easy.

IV.

We shall overcome...!

The song of the civil rights movement in the USA in the 50s and 60s, has become a world hit. In many conflicts between the state and its citizens and between parts of society all over the world, it has become synonym for hope, courage, confidence, optimism and a rejection of the fear:

"*We shall overcome...!*" This outcry, this courageous announcement, has, as these years shown, not finally solved the problem of civil rights in the USA, but it has made it visible and a constant reminder.

"*We shall overcome...!*" This should also be the courageous, optimistic anthem of all democrats who defend themselves in the daily struggle against the disavowal and the destruction of the idea of constitutional democracy.

We will overcome this disastrous period of mockery of truth, contempt for science, relativization of human rights, disregard for the sovereignty of nations, and distrust of international cooperation.

This would certainly not please some autocrats, even in the country of origin of this powerful announcement of the civil rights movement. And that would be good. It would prove that we are on the right track to our common goal. After all, the fight for democracy and against autocrats is ultimately also about the dignity and rights of citizens.

Brussels, January 2026

Kurt Schelter