

German Reunification from an international perspective

Stand: April 2025

Jahrgangsstufe	10, Lernbereich 10.1: Das geteilte Deutschland und die Wiedervereinigung
Fach	Geschichte
Übergreifende Bildungs- und Erziehungsziele	Politische Bildung Sprachliche Bildung
Zeitraumen	2 Unterrichtsstunden
Benötigtes Material	ein- und zweisprachiges Wörterbuch

Kompetenzerwartungen

Die Schülerinnen und Schüler ...

- erörtern multikausal Voraussetzungen, Ursachen und Folgen der Wiedervereinigung und nutzen ihre Erkenntnisse, um die Bedeutung der Wende von 1989 für die deutsche und die europäische Geschichte zu beurteilen. (Urteilskompetenz, Orientierungskompetenz, Sachkompetenz, Narrative Kompetenz)
- gliedern die Zeit der deutschen Teilung und Wiedervereinigung anhand folgender Grundlegender Daten und Begriffe und diskutieren deren Stellenwert in der Geschichtskultur: [...] 9. November 1989 Öffnung der innerdeutschen Grenze, 3. Oktober 1990 „Tag der Deutschen Einheit“ [...]. (Sachkompetenz, Orientierungskompetenz)

Inhalte zu den Kompetenzen:

- deutsche Wiedervereinigung: internationale und nationale Vorbedingungen [...], die Schritte zur staatlichen Einheit

Lesson Plan

Hinführung / Lead-in:

1989/1990, Germany: The wall has fallen, the GDR is close to economic collapse, and people demonstrating on the streets of the GDR demand German reunification with the slogan “*Wir sind ein Volk!*”. In a speech in the German parliament on 28/11/1989 West German chancellor Helmut Kohl promises to realise this goal by implementing a 10-step-program ultimately leading to a united Germany. However, at this time deciding on the future fate of their nation(s) is not up to the German people and parliament alone, The Allies still hold in reserve certain rights and responsibilities with regard to Germany, for example the right to approve its borders. The political leaders of France, the Soviet Union, the UK and the USA therefore convene at the so-called “2+4 conference” to discuss their points of view on the “German question” and a possible reunification.

Leitfrage / Central question

How did international interests influence and shape the process and form of German reunification?

Arbeitsauftrag / Tasks:

Conduct a conference of the Allied powers, in which you negotiate the form and process of German reunification as well as the international role of a future unified Germany.

The following steps will help you:

1. Get together in groups of four and assign the roles of the Allies.
2. Prepare your role by analysing the material for your nation (M 3 - M 6). Take notes on the nation's attitude towards German reunification, its concerns, demands and expectations. Use a dictionary if necessary.
3. Optional: Use the central questions suggested in M 1 to structure your ideas.
4. Present your nation's point of view in a discussion with the other Allied powers. Try to find sustainable solutions for and sound compromises on the form and international role of a future unified Germany.
5. Optional: Use the central questions in M 1 to structure your discussion.
6. Present the central results of your group discussion to the class and evaluate which solutions and compromises are the most reasonable.
7. Compare your results with the actual treaty negotiated between the two German states and the Allied powers in 1990 by reading an excerpt of the “Two Plus Four Treaty” (M 7) and summing up its central provisions in a mind map.

Word bank

German question – die deutsche Frage

The Four Powers, the Allied powers, the Allies – Siegermächte / Alliierte

to negotiate – verhandeln

treaty – Vertrag

to ratify a treaty – einen Vertrag ratifizieren

federal army – Bundeswehr

chair(person) – Vorsitzende(r) (einer Diskussion)

to chair (sth.) – den Vorsitz haben / führen

provisions – Bestimmungen, Maßnahmen

renunciation (formal) or rejection of sth. – Abkehr von etwas

(right of) self-determination – Selbstbestimmung(srecht)

sustainable – nachhaltig, zukunftsfähig

GDR / German Democratic Republic – Deutsche Demokratische Republik (DDR)

FRG / Federal Republic of Germany – Bundesrepublik Deutschland (BRD)

USSR / Union of Soviet Socialist Republics – UdSSR

North Atlantic Treaty Organization – NATO

European Community(ies) / EC – Europäische Gemeinschaft(en) / EG

European Monetary Union – Europäische Währungsunion

Material

M 1 Possible topics and questions for the discussion

attitude towards reunification in general and towards the speed of the reunification process (slowing it down ↔ speeding it up?)

✎ Notes:

question of Germany's military power - e.g. size of the federal army; nuclear weapons; stationing of foreign troops in (East)Germany

✎ Notes:

question of the borders of a unified Germany (esp. 'Oder-Neisse-Line' to Poland)

✎ Notes:

question of the geopolitical status of a unified Germany - e.g. neutrality, membership in military alliances like the NATO, role in the European Community

✎ Notes:

question of the future relationship between a unified Germany and the Allies.

✎ Notes:

(If you do not have specific information on a topic, try to discuss it in a way that is in accordance with your nation's point of view on reunification.)



M 2 Observation sheet for

_____ (name and role of the student that is observed)

- a) Role fulfilment (e.g. historically accurate, flexible, skilful, active ↔ passive)

- b) Argumentative and rhetorical strategies (e.g. descriptive, convincing, use of effective rhetorical devices, mostly initiating ↔ mostly responding, proposing compromises)

- c) Content (e.g. coherent, comprehensible, well-informed and well-founded arguments, historical accuracy, number of different arguments)

- d) Use of language (e.g. range of vocabulary, suitable level of formality, fluency)

M 3 The United Kingdom on German Reunification

In the United Kingdom, there was persistent mistrust towards Germany, its military power and the threat of a possible re-emergence of Nazism. The Conservative Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, declared that she would prefer Germany to remain divided. She was also worried about possible territorial claims of a unified Germany, especially in the East ('Oder-Neisse-Line'). In her memoirs ("The Downing Street Years") she expresses her concerns:

Margaret Thatcher: THE GERMAN PROBLEM AND THE BALANCE OF POWER

There was — and still is — a tendency to regard the 'German problem' as something too delicate for well-brought-up politicians to discuss. This always seemed to me a mistake. The problem had several elements which could only be addressed if non-Germans considered them openly and constructively. I do not believe in collective guilt: it is individuals who are morally accountable for their actions. But I do believe in national character [...] Since the unification of Germany under Bismarck [...] Germany has veered unpredictably between aggression and self-doubt. Germany's immediate neighbours, such as the French and the Poles, are more deeply aware of this than the British, let alone the Americans; [...] But perhaps the first people to recognize the 'German problem' are the modern Germans, the vast majority of whom are determined that Germany should not be a great power able to exert itself at others' expense. [...]

As I have already argued, that is one reason why so many Germans genuinely — I believe wrongly — want to see Germany locked in a federal Europe. In fact, Germany is more rather than less likely to dominate within that framework; for a reunited Germany is simply too big and powerful to be just another player within Europe. Moreover, Germany has always looked east as well as west, though it is economic expansion rather than territorial aggression which is the modern manifestation of this tendency. Germany is thus by its very nature a destabilizing rather than a stabilizing force in Europe. Only the military and political engagement of the United States in Europe and close relations between the other two strongest Sovereign states in Europe — Britain and France — are sufficient to balance German power. [...]

Source: Margaret Thatcher: The Downing Street Years, London 1995, p. 790 f.

M 4 France on German Reunification

France, in accordance with its role as leading power in Europe after World War II, was quite hesitant about German reunification. In the end, however, it was prepared to accept it as long as certain conditions were met, among them the reduction of the German military forces, the permanent acceptance of its borders and its renunciation of a path of neutrality.

- 5 *In a conversation with Mikhail Gorbachev, French President Francois Mitterrand stated his position as follows (Kiev, December 6, 1989):*

Mitterrand: [...] I am speaking with you absolutely freely. We have special relations with the FRG. In 1963 De Gaulle and Adenauer signed an alliance treaty ["Elysée-Treaty"]. And I am abiding by that treaty. That is why it is more difficult for me than, maybe, for others, to deny the
10 Germans the right to make mistakes. But I am true to my duty -- to preserve the balance in Europe.

We should not change the order of the processes. First and foremost among them should be European integration, the evolution of Eastern Europe, and the all-European process, the creation of a peaceful order in Europe. [...]

- 15 *In 1989–1990, French President François Mitterrand discussed the "German question" in several meetings with British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. During their talks he voiced serious concerns about the reunification, fearing it could create a powerful "bad" Germany that might dominate Europe again, similar to before World War I. He warned that if West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl succeeded, a unified Germany might end up with more land and
20 control in Europe than Hitler ever had, leaving the continent vulnerable.*

- While Mitterrand seemed to encourage Thatcher's strong opposition to reunification, possibly to isolate Britain and marginalize its influence, he privately acknowledged that European countries would be unable to stop reunification. His real goal was to bring a united Germany into the European project, particularly through the European Monetary Union, to ensure
25 Germany's power would be tied to a united Europe rather than used independently.*

Source: "Record of Telephone Conversation between Mikhail Gorbachev and President of France Francois Mitterrand", November 14, 1989; in: History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Archive of the Gorbachev Foundation, Notes of A.S. Chernyaev. Translated by Svetlana Savranskaya for the National Security Archive; <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/120825> (21/11/2024).

M 5 The USA on German Reunification

It was the USA that provided the most active support to the West German Government, as the FRG represented its strongest partner in continental Europe. Yet the United States was also aware that reunification had to take into account the concerns of neighbouring European states. U.S. attention was especially focused on ensuring that the Soviet Union wouldn't face instability similar to 1930s Germany. For this reason, Washington aimed to carefully manage reunification in a way that would address Soviet concerns about security, prestige, and economic stability.

Excerpts from a memorandum of a conversation between Helmut Kohl and George Bush at Camp David., Feb 24 1990

The President: [...] We need full participation for Germany in NATO. It will be stabilizing for Europe We will continue to keep US troops in Germany and in Europe despite the pressure.

5 [...] You know and I know your European neighbors are nervous about this. [...]

Chancellor Kohl: I totally agree [...] Most of the French people are on our side but the political class is against us. [...] The Netherlands and the UK are also problems. Margaret Thatcher: I can't do anything about her. I can't understand her. The Empire declined fighting Germany - she thinks the UK paid this enormous price and here comes Germany again.

10 The President: We don't look at it that way. We don't fear the ghosts of the past. Margaret does. But you and we must bend over backwards to consult, recognizing our unique role in history. [...] The United States can and will help. When you say Germany will be staying in NATO with full membership that helps. Margaret told me today that everyone expects German unity (although six months ago she felt differently). But she said everyone is worried about the

15 uncertainties. Germany being fully involved in NATO helps. [...] On the Two Plus Four, we don't want the Soviets to use this mechanism as an instrument to force you to create the Germany they might want. [...]

Chancellor Kohl: Gorbachev will have his views on NATO. [...]

The President: Full German membership is linked to our ability to sustain US troops in Europe.

20 You must understand that. [...] On US-Soviet relations we want to see Gorbachev succeed. We want a successful US-Soviet Summit which will give him a boost at home [...] Having said that the Soviets are not in a position to dictate Germany's relationship with NATO. What worries me is talk that Germany must not stay in NATO. To hell with that. We prevailed and they didn't. We can't let the Soviets clutch victory from the jaws of defeat. [...]

25 Chancellor Kohl: Of course. We are in complete agreement. There will be concerns for the Soviets if Germany remains in NATO for their security. And they will want to get something in return.

The President: You've got deep pockets.

Source: <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16127-document-13-memorandum-conversation-between>
(21/11/2024).

M 6 The Soviet Union on German Reunification

The Soviet Union was the state which could first and foremost decide the fate of the GDR. It would have preferred Germany to remain divided, yet when reunification seemed inevitable, Mikhail Gorbachev stated that he would accept this according to the old Soviet ideal of a unified and neutral Germany that wouldn't be part of NATO. German chancellor Kohl, however, declared that neutrality was unacceptable.

In subsequent meetings between Kohl and Gorbachev, several compromises were reached that addressed Soviet concerns about security and economic stability.

Germany agreed to limit its future military to a maximum of 370,000 troops, to allow Soviet forces to stay in East Germany for a transition period, and pay for the maintenance and eventual withdrawal of the about 380,000 Soviet soldiers in the GDR. Additionally, Germany pledged that NATO troops and nuclear weapons would not be stationed in East Germany during and probably also after the transition.

To address concerns at home, Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev argued that a united Germany's NATO membership could actually benefit the Soviet Union by fostering cooperation: *"Whether we want it or not, the day will come when the reality will be that a united Germany is in NATO," he said. "And if that is its choice, then it will still make formal arrangements to cooperate with the Soviet Union, and that's to our advantage."* He also emphasized that Germany would be crucial to the Soviet Union's economic future and reassured his citizens that Germany's postwar commitment to peace and democracy showed it was unlikely to repeat its aggressive past: *'The Germans, bearing on their shoulders the lesson of history, a dramatic, traumatic history, have in both their states reached certain conclusions,' he said. "They have shown in their postwar history that they are for democracy, that their policy is that no war should arise from German soil, that they are open to cooperation with other nations. Without this nothing could have happened.'*

Quotes by Gorbachev from: Serge Schmemmann: Evolution in Europe; Gorbachev clears way for German unity, dropping objection to NATO membership; in: New York Times, July 17, 1990.

<https://www.nytimes.com/1990/07/17/world/evolution-europe-gorbachev-clears-way-for-german-unity-dropping-objection-nato.html> (16/11/2024).

Interview with Mikhail Gorbachev in "Der Spiegel" from 2019:



<https://bycs.link/Gorbachev>

esp. question 3 ("What responses...") and 10 ("You gave the Germans reunification...")

Interview with Mikhail Gorbachev conducted by Anna Sadovnikova: "It Was Impossible To Go On Living Like Before"; in: DER SPIEGEL, 46/2019; <<https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/a-1295580.html>> (21/11/2024).

M 7 Treaty on the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany (September 12, 1990)

The Federal Republic of Germany, the German Democratic Republic, the French Republic, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the United States of America, [...]

- 5 Welcoming the fact that the German people, freely exercising their right of self-determination, have expressed their will to bring about the unity of Germany as a state so that they will be able to serve the peace of the world as an equal and sovereign partner in a united Europe; [...]

Have agreed as follows:

ARTICLE 1

- 10 (1) The united Germany shall comprise the territory of the Federal Republic of Germany, the German Democratic Republic and the whole of Berlin. Its external borders shall be the borders of the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic and shall be definitive from the date on which the present Treaty comes into force. [...]

(2) The united Germany and the Republic of Poland shall confirm the existing border between them in a treaty that is binding under international law.

- 15 (3) The united Germany has no territorial claims whatsoever against other states and shall not assert any in the future. [...]

ARTICLE 2

The Governments of the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic reaffirm their declarations that only peace will emanate from German soil. [...]

20 ARTICLE 3

(1) The Governments of the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic reaffirm their renunciation of the manufacture and possession of [...] nuclear, biological and chemical weapons.

- 25 (2) [...] The Government of the Federal Republic of Germany undertakes to reduce the personnel strength of the armed forces of the united Germany to 370,000 [...].

ARTICLE 4

- 30 (1) [...] The united Germany and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics will settle by treaty the conditions for and the duration of the presence of Soviet armed forces on the territory of the present German Democratic Republic and of Berlin, as well as the conduct of the withdrawal of these armed forces which will be completed by the end of 1994 [...]

ARTICLE 5 [...]

(3) Following the completion of the withdrawal of the Soviet armed forces from the territory of the present German Democratic Republic and of Berlin [...] [f]oreign armed forces and nuclear weapons or their carriers will not be stationed in that part of Germany or deployed there.

35 ARTICLE 6

The right of the united Germany to belong to alliances, with all the rights and responsibilities arising therefrom, shall not be affected by the present Treaty.

ARTICLE 7

40 (1) The French Republic, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the United States of America hereby terminate their rights and responsibilities relating to Berlin and to Germany as a whole. [...]

(2) The United Germany shall have accordingly full sovereignty over its internal and external affairs. [...]

“Treaty on the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany”; Source: American Foreign Policy Current Documents 1990. Department of State, Washington, 1991. <<https://usa.usembassy.de/etexts/2plusfour8994e.htm>> (21/11/2024).

Hinweise zum Unterricht

The lessons are part of a sequence on the topic of 'The way to German reunification and its consequences'. The students should therefore already be familiar with the changes taking place in Eastern Europe and East Germany in the late 1980s (for example the concept of 'Perestroika') and have a basic idea of the power structure in Europe.

The depth and length of the discussion can be adjusted according to available time and expected standard using a complete or shortened version of the suggested topics in M 1. In case of time constraints, task 5 (mind map) could also be given as homework. The students should then present and compare their mind maps in the next lesson. It is also possible to teach the lessons as part of an interdisciplinary project with English.

The word bank can be handed out to the students to introduce complex vocabulary. It should be expanded by the students in the course of the lessons.

Optionally, the conference groups can be extended to 5 students. The fifth student is assigned the role of chair who will then lead the discussion based on the central question(s) suggested in M 1.

After the students have presented the central results of their "conferences" to the class and evaluated the compromises they have reached, they could also be asked to reflect on the form of their political discussion: Which problems were easy or difficult to solve? Which persuasive strategies were most effective?

Alternatively, one group can be asked to hold their discussion in front of the class while the other students each observe one participant and give feedback on their performance. A sheet with categories (an example is suggested in M 2) can be provided to the students as a guideline.

Beispiele für Lösungsmöglichkeiten der Schülerinnen und Schüler

1.–4. Preparation and enactment of a political discussion: Individual solutions

Overall, the students should understand that concerns about Germany's past as well as different ideas of its future geopolitical role in Europe and worldwide shaped the negotiations of the Allied powers and their outcome in the form of the "2+4-treaty". The different sources show that the USA was the strongest supporter of German reunification (seeing Germany as a strong ally in NATO and not sharing historical concerns of a re-emergence of Nazism and German aggression), while the UK under Thatcher, afraid of German dominance and instability in Europe, took a very negative stance. France and the Soviet Union also had concerns and hesitated in their agreement to reunification. They, however, didn't strictly oppose it in the long run as long as certain conditions were met in the final agreements.

5. Mind map: (other solutions possible)

Territorial provisions:

- united Germany = FRG, GDR, Berlin
- borders are permanent and inviolable (esp. Oder-Neisse-Line towards Poland)

Political provisions:

- united Germany will be part of NATO
- united Germany will be part of the EU
- united Germany is granted full sovereignty



Military provisions:

- German army reduced to 370.000
- ban of (German) nuclear, biological and chemical weapons
- gradual withdrawal of Soviet troops from East Germany
- no foreign troops or nuclear weapons may be stationed in East Germany

Commitment to peace