Chapter One
German Unification, Western Order, and the Post–Cold War Restructuring of the International System

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Introduction
The Berlin Wall fell in November 1989, and less than a year later a treaty was signed that formally united the German Democratic Republic (GDR) with the Federal Republic. Just months before, most American and European observers thought that German unification was still only a distant possibility. Surprisingly, although the Soviet Union initially preferred other outcomes, it ultimately acquiesced in these unsettling developments. Soviet leaders conceded not only the integration of their former ally into West Germany but also that the newly united Germany would remain fully a part of the Western alliance and European Community (EC). The balance between East and West shifted abruptly in favor of the West, but this did not trigger a new Cold War crisis. Instead, Germany was quickly and quietly reunited. As Chancellor Helmut Kohl remarked at the time, this “was the first unification of a country in modern history achieved without war, pain or strife.”

These remarkable events were not preordained. Germany’s European neighbors initially resisted a quick move toward German unification. After all, as Chancellor Kohl depicted the coming drama to Secretary Baker at a breakfast meeting shortly after the Berlin Wall fell, “Change in Germany means change in the math of Europe, and that means change in the structure of Europe and the world.” The leaders of France and Britain indicated serious reservations about the implications of German unification for European peace and stability and its impact on Gorbachev, Soviet reform, and the unwinding of the Cold War. British prime minister Margaret Thatcher said at a December 1989 meeting with EC leaders and
President Bush that German unification should not occur for another ten or fifteen years. The stakes were high because if European leaders broke with Germany on such a fundamental issue, the fate of the Western system would be thrown into doubt. Moreover, Moscow could have thwarted German unification—at least for a time. Its immediate leverage was the more than half a million troops and dependents that remained stationed in East Germany. Beyond this, it also had leverage to the extent that its consent—and the legitimacy that consent would confer on German unification—was necessary for a stable outcome. All of these moving parts were in play in November 1989. But in the end, on September 12, 1990, the four allied victors in World War II met in Moscow to sign the Treaty of the Final Settlement, restoring full sovereignty to a united Germany and relinquishing their “rights and obligations” to Berlin and Germany. Two weeks before the German settlement, at a summit between U.S. president George Bush and Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev in Helsinki, the issue of German unification was not even on the agenda.4

The quickness and seeming ease of this historical passage from division to unification was surprising. But it was also important in world historical terms. It spelled not just the end of the Cold War but also the grand settlement of Germany’s relationship to and position within Europe—a geopolitically fraught question that had consumed European and world politics for over a century. Beyond this, the unification of Germany was also a moment when the terms of the wider global system were also on the table, at least implicitly. That is, this was a “constitutional” moment when the rules and architecture of relations among the great powers were debated and a settlement was reached. Politicians and diplomats were not just struggling over the specific issues of Germany’s polity and relations with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Soviet Union, and Europe, they were struggling over the basic structure of great-power relations.

This chapter looks at this remarkable moment and asks three questions. First, how was unification accomplished, that is, accomplished in the world of power politics and diplomacy? How were fears, insecurities, and disagreements overcome? Second, what does the unification of Germany—its relatively quick and peaceful accomplishment—say about the wider postwar Western and international order? Third, what is the future of the “Cold War settlement” of which German unification was a part?

I argue that the most striking aspect of the 1989 moment was how the institutions of the West—NATO, the EC, and the wider liberal international order—shaped and facilitated the flow of events. There were several possibilities for how the collapse of East Germany and the crisis in the