



Transcript

## Between dream and tragedy: Europe's story after 1989

### Episode 1: 1989

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This podcast is brought to you by:

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Producer: Caroline Thornham (SPG Media)

#### Featuring

This episode features Timothy Snyder, Mary Kaldor and Zsuzsanna Szelényi. Archive sourced for non-commercial educational purposes for critique and review from YouTube and Learning On-Screen.

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**News Reporter 1:** From the Berlin Wall specifically, take a look at them. They've been there since last night. They are here in the thousands; they are here in the tens of thousands.

**News Reporter 2:** And as the joyous hordes of Berliners were still streaming through the wall, the East German communist government said they can come and go permanently. They can come into West Berlin and have a look and then come back home again, with no special documents required.

**News Reporter 1:** I'm standing on top of the Berlin Wall which for years has been the most potent symbol of the Division of Europe. And there can be few better illustrations of the changes which are sweeping across this continent than the party, which is taking place here on top of it tonight.

**Person [singing]:** I wanna be an astronaut.

**LC:** The streets are full of revelers, shouting and singing. One by one, across Central and Eastern Europe, the totalitarian communist regimes have begun to fall. After four decades of cold war between the USSR and the western bloc, the iron curtain is crashing down and the enduring the symbol of a divided Europe, The Berlin Wall, is being dismantled brick by brick.

**News Reporter 4:** At Checkpoint Charlie, they were swamped. They simply gave up, opened the gates and allowed thousands through the one crossing point that had remained firmly closed.

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**News Reporter 5:** It was a cheerfully anarchic night. \*People cheering\* Obstacles were unceremoniously removed. The border was no longer sacrosanct, and its guardians were flabbergasted.

**LC:** It's hard to imagine the euphoria of that night in Berlin. What had once seemed impossible had suddenly become a reality. Old friends were re-united, a cyclist rode his bike along the wall, and people from East and West Germany came together to sing and drink and take in the moment. 1989 was a time of immense possibility, the end of an era of dictatorship and the beginning of something else. People dreamed of a new Europe, a democratic Europe, a united Europe.

Three decades on from the fall of the wall, what do we make of that new Europe, created out of the ashes of communism?

I'm Luke Cooper, and this is, "Between Dream and Tragedy," a podcast in which I'm asking where things went wrong for the dream of European unity. The EU emerged from 1989 as a project of peace, democracy, and international collaboration. But today, many have lost faith in it. How did we get here? Is the European story doomed, or can we bring back the energy and idealism of 1989?

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Since the UK voted for Brexit, I've been studying the rise of nationalism and questioning how we can rebuild support for a united Europe. In this series, I share what I've learned. It's a story that moves anxiously between hope and tragedy, but it starts with hope. 1989 was a crucible in which a new vision of Europe took shape. The dreams and myths that emerged would determine the continent's fate for decades to come. This episode is about those founding myths. The conflict between nationalism and European unity we see today may seem a far cry from the optimism of 1989. But I'm going to show you how that tension was an underlying part of the European dream right from the beginning.

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**Winston Churchill:** I wish to speak to you today about the tragedy of Europe. This noble continent, comprising the fairest and the most cultivated regions of the earth, enjoying a temperate and equable climate, is the home of all the great parent races of the Western world.

**LC:** Winston Churchill, speaking at the University of Zurich in 1946. Europe had been in a state of war for much of the previous four decades, he proposed a remedy.

**Churchill:** What is this sovereign remedy? It is to recreate the European family, or as much of it as we can. And to provide it with a structure under which it can dwell in peace, in safety, and in freedom. We must build a kind of United States of Europe.

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**LC:** After the bloodshed of the Second World War, Churchill's message was powerful.

**Churchill:** We must all turn our backs upon the horrors of the past. We must look to the future. If we are to form the United States of Europe or whatever name it may take, we must begin now. And therefore, I say to you, let Europe arise.

**LC:** Churchill is a complex figure. To some, he was a racist imperialist, to others, he was an anti-fascist democrat. And in truth, he was all of these things and more. But his early and enthusiastic support for European unity was important. He was a key architect of the post-war dream of Europe. And for Churchill, that dream was of a peace project to end the wars of this continent, once and for all. Since Churchill, Europe has taken major steps towards unity. The first practical step came in 1950 with the Schuman plan.

**News Anchor 6:** \*Music\* World interest focuses on the Quai d'Orsay as six European nations, including Western Germany, meet for their first working session on the Schuman plan for pooling steel and coal.

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**LC:** Coal and steel were critical industrial materials for the war effort. The French Foreign Minister, Robert Schuman, launched an appeal to pool them. By placing coal and steel under the supervision of a common European authority, Europe hoped to move decisively away from the conflicts of the previous years. This shift was warmly received by the governments of West Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg. Despite Churchill's grand speeches, Britain hadn't joined yet. Together, they would form the founding six, the core countries setting out together on a new political journey. But this period was also a time where Europe was becoming divided.

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**Churchill:** From Stalin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the continent. Behind that line lie all the capitals of the ancient states of Central and Eastern Europe.

**LC:** Churchill again describing the growing division between the communist East headed by the USSR and the capitalist West, aligned with the United States.

Soviet Russia was expanding westward, and the world would soon feel the chill of the Cold War.

**Harry S. Truman:** The real threat to our security isn't the danger of bankruptcy, it is the danger of communist aggression. The program I recommended to the Congress today is a necessity if we're going to block the plans of the Soviet rulers to dominate the world.

**LC:** The U.S. President, Truman, announcing a plan of military spending in 1952. Under the shadow of the Cold War, the six Western countries that had joined the Schuman plan were only taking tentative steps towards unity. They remained fundamentally self-governing nations with their own currencies, foreign policies, and political systems. But they were still pioneers of an early European project. Britain eventually joined, as would others. The Schuman plan planted the seed that would become the European Union.

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This chain of events becomes a part of Europe's peace project narrative, and it goes broadly like this, the club of Western European nations forms a bloc in opposition to the USSR. When the cold war ends, this creates a new opportunity for peace in Europe. The East embraces the ways of the West. What we now call the EU is created through this series of world-changing events.

All political projects have myths. They might start out from a few basic truths, but they make claims that are too sweeping and miss something crucial about our history. The peace project narrative is a cornerstone of the European dream, but it obscures some crucial tensions that were at play in 1989 in both the West and the East. Let's start with the West.

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**Timothy Snyder:** The European Union is fascinating in its mythology because it's an entity which presents itself as being above mythology, beyond mythology. It generally legitimates itself in these purely rational terms. So, "We allow people to do what they already want to do. War is a bad thing, so we prevent bad things." And that's the European myth, right? The myth is a kind of anti-myth.

**LC:** Yale professor and permanent fellow at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna, Timothy Snyder. He believes that the European peace project is a myth, and it has some parallels to the myths that surround nations and nationalism.

**Snyder:** The National myth, which is not true, is that there are nations in Europe that have long histories, and in that history, they've generally had states, and those nation states have been around with us and they've had experiences and made decisions. That's something that's so deeply under the scan, I mean, in the bones of Europeans, that you can't really challenge it.

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**LC:** What he's saying here might sound confusing. The idea that European nations exist is something we take for granted. But what Timothy means is that to really understand what happened in Western Europe in the second half of the 20th century, we need to see the countries involved from a different perspective.

**Snyder:** What's actually true and what's much more interesting and much more useful if one's trying to understand what's going to happen or predict what's gonna happen next, is that the history of Europe is actually a history of empires.

**LC:** Take Britain as an example. My country has this very dominant idea that we stood alone, a plucky, individual nation that confronted Hitler. It's the Blitz spirit and Dunkirk.

**Person:** \*Music\* Quoting an American newspaper, "The indiscriminate orgy of destruction is not the weapon to defeat England. From the dust of London arises only new life and hotter defiance. Hardened and angry, Britain fights back. We've got an adapted slogan now: Can we take it? Sure, we can take it right back where it came from."

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**LC:** This is a vital part of our national myth. It's a sense of national identity for a lot of people in the UK. But Britain as an island never stood alone. Even before the United States and the Soviet Union entered the war, it fought Nazi Germany as an empire. Britain was supported by the dominion countries of the Commonwealth, and its Imperial possessions across the world. This includes the vast populous state of India, long referred to as the jewel in the crown of the British Empire.

In truth, after the Second World War, a series of European empires discovered that imperialism was no longer possible. They didn't have this realization overnight, it happened gradually. Their empires had to collapse before they came to terms with it. Britain and France in particular carried on fighting to keep their empires. They fought wars in the Suez, Algeria, Vietnam, and Kenya. They were desperate to maintain their Imperial might. In fact, in the decade that followed the Schuman speech in 1950, the idea of European unity was very much based on the sharing of Imperial possessions. The spoils of empire would be pooled in the hope that it might make it easier to maintain imperialism overall. This project even had a name, Eurafrica, but it failed. Eurafrica didn't survive French defeat in the Algerian War.

**Reporter:** \*Music\* Algerian Muslims took to the hills under the banner of a new organization, the FLN. They launched attacks on the French. French patrols in the back country were ambushed.

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**LC:** 1960 was a big year for the end of the European empires. It's sometimes called the year of Africa, because so many different African states won their independence. And these circumstances drove the search for something else. This new Europe of nations, not empires, needed a bigger entity. It made the idea of an EU-like organization only more attractive. Britain would eventually join the founding six in what was by then the European Economic Community in 1973, a decision confirmed in a referendum two years later.

Not everyone was happy. Anticipating Britain's eventual exit from the European club, far right politician, Enoch Powell, declared his intention to carry on campaigning against membership. He used language that exemplified the British national myth. He compared the struggle against European unity to the fight against Nazi Germany. Pro-Europeans were derided as the new appeasers.

**Person:** Are you suggesting that from now on, you and others who feel like you should continue a parliamentary struggle to get Britain out?

**Enoch Powell:** But of course. Of course, this is like September 1938. In October 1938, I'm sure that the vast majority, if Neville Chamberlain had gone to the country, he would have swept the country for an active abnegation. But the very same people, within 12 months, when they saw behind the façade, when they

penetrated to the realities, stood up to fight for the continued existence of our nation. And that's what will happen.

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**LC:** Britain would eventually follow Enoch Powell's advice and break with the EU in the name of national sovereignty. The language around Brexit can help us see the significance of Timothy Snyder's critique of the European myth. Much of the argument for Brexit was fueled by this sense of nostalgia. It drew on the glory days of independent Britain.

\*Classical music\*

**British Politician 1:** I just simply want people to reflect on the fact that those millions of people who died in both World Wars died for a reason. It was to do with sustaining the freedom and democracy of this house.

**British Person 1:** Philip II of Spain, Louis XIV of France, Napoleon, and Hitler, all wanted to create a single European power. The EU is following the footsteps of these historic figures but using different means.

**British Person 2:** Does my right honourable friend recall the words of Francis Drake, "There must be a beginning of any great matter, but the continuing unto the end until it be thoroughly finished yields the true glory."

**LC:** But Brexit supporters forget that Britain itself has never functioned as a completely individual nation state. Before it had the EU, it had empire. Now, post-Brexit, it has neither. Countries like Britain and France are fragments of empire. They are not simply nations that decided to cooperate. Their diminished status forced them to. Outside of the European Union, these post-Imperial fragments will find they have less sovereignty, not more. They will get caught between the demands of much larger states and blocs. The peace project narrative obscures this reality. We run into a problem if the justification for the EU starts and ends with its role as a keeper of the peace.

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If this is the only thread binding the EU together then when there's no longer a risk of war, it hits upon a legitimacy issue. Today, we're living in a time of relative peace. But we've forgotten about all the other reasons why countries



joined the European Union. A myth that seems to bolster the EU has become so dominant that it actually becomes a problem for the EU going forward.

So, in the 1950s, Western European states were forced to pursue something else, integration when their empires rose up in resistance. But how does the USSR and its satellite states fit into this picture? Well, in its own way, the USSR was also an empire-like system. The Eastern European communist states were created by the Soviet Union after the Second World War. They were essentially puppets of Joseph Stalin's Russian government. These regimes were put in place by the Red Army after its successful defeat of the Nazis on the Eastern Front. One Polish veteran describes how he accepted these new realities.

**Person reading the veteran's quote:** The most important thing for me was for my mother and sister to come from Siberia, and for us to begin rebuilding the country. We also needed to secure our borders, which were seriously threatened. Staying in the army gave me that chance.

**LC:** There were, however, always dissidents, free thinkers that never accepted authoritarianism, as this [00:19:30.795] Polish journalist describes.

**Polish journalist and English interpreter:** If you didn't grow up under communism, you wouldn't understand the essence of it and why we had to end it. I was lucky to grow up in a family that knew what communism was about. We knew there was this free world and we didn't have it. We had this taken away from us. I was lucky to read this book, "1984" by George Orwell, and I was able to compare. I could see that one day, this will have to end.

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**LC:** Communism claimed to reject nationalism. It supported the international unity of all the working classes and peoples of the world. But in practice, these regimes used the feelings and emotions associated with national identity very effectively in their propaganda efforts. This was true for states that were part of the USSR. It was even more so for the satellite states, like Hungary and Poland, that retained their formal independence. But one nation still stood predominant over the rest, Russia.

But in the 1980s, the winds of change swept across Eastern Europe. 1989 was a pivotal year. One by one, the old regimes fell in a series of peaceful revolutions.

The Berlin Wall, for so long the symbol of a divided Europe, came crashing down. But change came across the whole of Eastern Europe. In Czechoslovakia, in November and December 1989, a non-violent transfer of power known as the Velvet Revolution brought vast numbers of people onto the streets.

**News Reporter:** They packed into Wenceslas Square. They jammed the side streets, and there were not just students and intellectuals, there were workers too and in large numbers. And in case the Communist Party and its government did not get the message from the mere sight of this many people, they drove it home with their chants. \*Inaudible chanting\* "Resign, resign," they demanded.

**LC:** It's easy to imagine now that the end of these regimes was inevitable. But change happened remarkably quickly. The wave of anti-communism actually bubbled up in different ways in countries across the Soviet Union and used similar notions of nationalism to the ones used to drum up support for communist rule.

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Today, Mary Kaldor is a professor at the London School of Economics. In the 1980s, she was a peace and pro-democracy campaigner. She observes how an agreement in 1975 called The Helsinki Accords had offered a glimmer of hope to the critics of the communist regimes. The accords not only improved relations between East and West, but also committed signatories to supporting human rights and freedom of thought in their own countries.

**Mary Kaldor:** People in Eastern Europe did feel that communism was there forever. And they were deeply depressed in that period. But what was interesting was that, towards the end of the 1970s, I think the Helsinki agreement made them feel maybe there were possibilities about openings. That's why they all latched on to Helsinki.

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**LC:** Adam Michnik was a Polish dissident, part of the small circles of intellectuals organizing against the communist regimes.

**Kaldor:** Michnik wrote his article, "The New Evolutionism" in 1987, where he was arguing for civil society. He was saying that we'll never overthrow these regimes through revolution. But if we could sort of expand the free space in

society, that may be the way to bring an end to communism. So, these were the beginning, but they were basically dissidents being very brave and being ready to go to prison, and not really thinking that what they did would affect things.

**LC:** The shift from marginal dissidents to mass movements started with the Solidarność labor movement campaign in Poland, and also the lesser-known peace movement based on the churches in East Germany. They formed early signs that the communist order ultimately rested on weak foundations. But even as late as January 1989, change was far from certain. Mary Kaldor describes a flowering of activity in the two-year run-up to '89.

**Kaldor:** All these groups started growing suddenly. We got the West-East dialogue in Hungary, which became Fidesz. The Freedom and Peace in Poland which was a young people's movement, Peace and Human Rights in East Germany, all sorts of groups in Czechoslovakia. And we just decided to hold a series of East-West meetings in different East European capitals. The only one which was actually legal was the one we held in Hungary in '87 where Fidesz was formed. But in '88, we held a meeting in Prague where we were all arrested.

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**LC:** The tide was turning against communist rule, but the picture was mixed across Eastern Europe. Zsuzsanna Szelényi was a dissident in the momentous events in Hungary.

**Zsuzsanna Szelényi:** The emergence of this former opposition organizations happened during '87, '88, which was like one, two years earlier than the Berlin Wall came down. So, we were already in the move of...you know, the opposition organizations sat down into a roundtable discussion with the communist regime in Hungary in May 1989. So, we were already beyond the critical point.

**LC:** In March 1989, many Eastern Europeans looked to Hungary. Seventy-five thousand people rallied in a demonstration. They raised a series of demands that were once completely forbidden.

**Hungarian protestor and English interpreter:** We want free and fair elections! Let human rights be respected! Freedom and self-determination for the peoples of Eastern Europe. We want a neutral, independent Hungary, withdraw all Soviet troops from Hungary! \*Crowd cheers\*

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**LC:** The USSR had lost its control of Eastern Europe. When we talk about the fall of communism, it is often too easy to lump the Eastern bloc nations together and think of it as one big, unified wave. However, although the revolutions have a lot in common, they took place on the national level. But they were also internationally connected and influenced one another. But as well as arguing for political freedom, they also demanded self-determination, the right to govern free of Soviet interference. And this special role for nationality has shaped the Europe that emerged since.

The debate over whether or not Europe should ever move towards full political union is an argument that continues to this day. How should this Europe of small states cooperating, not a Europe of empires, organize itself? Amid the optimism of 1989, it's easy to see how the idea of a peace project became part of the European myth. But the problem is, this narrative excludes the other factors that helped pave the way for the EU. When Western European states could no longer pursue empire, they decided to do something else, to integrate politically and economically with one another. And when Eastern European states left an empire, the Soviet one, they realized they also needed that something bigger, and that's why most decided to seek membership of the EU.

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In 1989, liberal democracy had triumphed as the countries emerging from the Soviet empire looked towards Western Europe. But when this was put into practice, the European dream would come into conflict with a new and often harsh reality. 1989 crystallizes the European myth. It puts in train a series of other conflicts. These tensions would shape the European story in the decades ahead.

How would Europe's nation states deal with the supranational aspects of integration? Would some get frustrated and resentful at the compromises this system involved? And would liberal democracy live up to how it was sold to the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe? For the newly freed states of Eastern Europe, the European dream was about to come crashing down around them.

Today, our democracies often feel very fragile. In my new book, "The Authoritarian Contagion," I investigate why that is. What's driving the lurch of

societies to this new authoritarian politics? And what exactly can we do about it? It's a warning of danger, but also an impetus to act. You can preorder your copy now for the discounted price of 7.99. Just go to the Bristol University Press website and search for "Authoritarian Contagion."

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"Between Dream and Tragedy" was produced by Caroline Thornham. The series is hosted by the Europe's Futures Programme at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna, and was supported by the ERSTE Foundation and the European Cultural Foundation. For more information on Europe's Futures, go to [europesfutures.eu](http://europesfutures.eu).