THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

BROOKINGS CAFETERIA PODCAST

FALL OF THE BERLIN WALL, 30 YEARS LATER

Washington, D.C.

Saturday, November 9, 2019

PARTICIPANTS:

Host:

FRED DEWS
Managing Editor, Podcasts and Digital Projects
The Brookings Institution

Guests:

CONSTANZE STELZENMÜLLER
Senior Fellow, Foreign Policy
Center on the United States and Europe
Kissinger Chair at the Library of Congress

DAVID WESSEL
Senior Fellow
Hutchins Center
The Brookings Institution

* * * * *

P R O C E E D I N G S

DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, the Podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm Fred Dews.

On November 9, 1989, the Government of East Germany announced that all of its citizens could visit West Germany and West Berlin. Crowds of Germans from East and West climbed on to the heavily-fortified wall surrounding West Berlin, and began chipping away at the concrete with hammers and other tools, in a celebratory atmosphere.

East German Guards stood down. Thus began the fall of the Berlin Wall that had divided the city since 1961, the beginning of the end of the Cold War was as hand.

In this episode I'm joined in the Brookings Podcast Network Studio by Constanze Stelzenmüller, a Senior Fellow at Brookings, and the Kissinger Chair at the Library of Congress. She is the author of the inaugural Foreign Policy Essay, titled, *German Lessons: Thirty Years after the End of History Elements of an Education*; and is here to discuss her fascinating reflection on the toppling of the Berlin Wall 30 years ago, and the lessons that were in store for her, her fellow Germans, Europe and the world.

Also on today's show, another edition of Wessel's Economic Update, with Senior Fellow, David Wessel, who directs the Hutchins Center on Fiscal and Monetary Policy here at Brookings. With the Federal debt at an all-time high, Wessel reflects on some takeaways from watching people play the Fiscal Ship game,

an interactive budgeting game developed by the Hutchins Center.

You can follow the Brookings Podcast Network on Twitter @PolicyPodcasts to get information and links to all of our shows including, Dollar & Sense, the Brookings Trade Podcast, the Current and our Events podcasts. And now on with the interview.

Constanze, welcome back to the Brookings Cafeteria.

STELZENMÜLLER: Thank you for having me.

DEWS: So, you've written an essay that Brookings has just published about 30 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, *Thirty Years after the End of History*, as you titled it. I want to talk about the essay in some detail, but first let's talk about some background to that history, the Berlin Wall. Can you talk about when it was built, and why it was built?

STELZENMÜLLER: All right. I should perhaps say, by way of introduction, that I was born just as the Wall went up. So, it was a fixture of my life growing up, it seemed like something completely permanent, it was unthinkable that it would ever disappear.

And the reason why it was built is that you have to remember that after the end of World War II and the capitulation of the Nazis in 1945, defeated Nazi Germany became an occupied country. The Soviets occupied one-third of the country mostly in the East, and half of Berlin, and the Americans, the Brits and the French occupied Western Germany from the Northern part which abuts Denmark all the way down to Bavaria which abuts Austria and Czech Republic, what used to be

Czechoslovakia.

And the delineation between the three Western powers, and the Soviet occupied zone, as it was then called, was basically border guards and road blocks, and it became increasingly clear throughout the 1950s and into the early-'60s that the Soviets were imposing -- by that time of course, there was an East German Government and the GDR, the German Democratic Republic, which was a communist party regime, and the GDR was part of the Warsaw Pact, the defense arrangement of the Soviets that mirrored NATO.

And it became increasingly clear that this was going to be a rigidly authoritarian government that was throwing civil society activists, protesters, people who had different opinions into prison. Was treating them badly, was cracking down really hard on any form of dissent, so people were fleeing.

People were trying to leave in the millions, and of course it was clear that this was also a brain drain. These were people who were young, who were qualified, who were important to the young East German Communist State for becoming a competitive state.

And so there wasn’t a buzz in the early 1960s about the Soviets and the East German regime perhaps attempting to fortify that border. And very famously, the then President of the GDR said, in a very sort of high, reedy voice and Saxon accent, "(Speaking in German). Nobody has the intention of building a wall."

And weeks later, suddenly, on a weekend, Berliners woke up to find that the border crossings had fortified with razor wire, that people were no longer allowed to

get through, the same was true of the so-called inner German border.

In other words, between the rest of the two countries which is about 1,700 miles long, and within less than a year a full wall had been built with razor wire, guard towers, a death strip that was mined, and guard dogs, and automatic shooting traps that would shoot at anything that moved.

DEWS: Beyond the very real danger that the Wall represented. I mean as you just mentioned people died trying to cross the barrier from its earliest days, from barbed wire. There are those famous photos of people trying to rush through the barbed wire including a soldier.

STELZENMÜLLER: Yes. Yes.

DEWS: Over many years. And it was a physical presence around the city of West Berlin.

STELZENMÜLLER: Mm-hmm.

DEWS: What did the wall come to symbolize for Germans and for the East/West rivalry and more generally?

STELZENMÜLLER: Well, I think it's easy to forget these days because Germany has been without the Wall now for longer than the time in which the wall existed, 27 years, and you now have an adult generation that grew up without the wall.

It's easy to forget the feeling of claustrophobia and of oppression that I remember so well from growing up as a West German. And it was really two things, one, it was clear that we were the ground zero of the Cold War nuclear standoff, and

we knew that if there was an outbreak of hostility between NATO and the Warsaw Pact it would be carried out on German territory, on West German and East German territory, and it would be conventional for three weeks at the most, and then it would go nuclear, and then we would all be a pile of ashes.

That is literally what my generation of young Germans grew up with. And it's, I think, worth remembering just how oppressive that was. And I think it's why a lot of young people, including me, tried to flee the country in other words, basically try and go to university at a graduate school somewhere else, and not come back because this seemed like literally an embodiment of what the punk movement of the time, its most famous slogan was: No Future. And we said, yeah, yeah, know what that feels like.

And the other thing it symbolized of course was that it was a punishment. It was a punishment for the Third Reich and the Nazis committing a World War and a Holocaust that killed at least six million Jews, and tens of millions of other Europeans, and people around the world, in the most horrific ways. And that this partition, and the wall that symbolized the partition, was an internal memorial of the crimes against humanity perpetrated by the Third Reich.

It was something that, at least in my mind's eye, was always accompanied by visions of other guard towers and razor wires of the concentration camps. And so it seemed that this was not just a forever memorial, but also a fitting memorial. It was something that was necessary to remind us of all of this.

DEWS: So you said that you and many of your peers during that time left the

country and went to graduate school abroad, did other things. Talk about where you were, what you remember about the events leading up to the fall of the Berlin Wall.

STELZENMÜLLER: Well, I was in Boston going to graduate school. This was literally my third degree. I had a German Master in Law, I had done a Master of Administration, and now is writing a doctoral thesis, a German doctoral thesis, but on an American topic.

And it was November so it is pretty cold, and I was sitting at my desk in the apartment I shared with three other roommates, clutching a mug of steaming tea, and wrapped in as much warm clothing as possible because these double-deckers in Massachusetts were so horribly drafty, and trying to focus on I think Puritan town meetings.

And the phone rings, and it rings, and rings. And I try to ignore it, and it goes on ringing. And finally I go get it, and it's a friend of mine, and the friend says, I have news. And I said, listen, this had better be good, you know, because I'm trying to concentrate here.

And she just said, turn on the TV the Wall is down. And I said, you know, that's a really dumb joke. And she just said, turn on the TV. And I was so startled by this that I went into our shared living room and it turned out we had this huge box TV that was like from the early 1970s, with grainy black and white imagery.

And I turned it on and I saw these images of people dancing and singing on top of the Berlin Wall with sledgehammers and Champagne bottles, an iconic image that's gone around the world. And I stood in front of that, and I really surprised

myself by bursting into tears. And I had no idea that I even felt this way about the Wall. And it was mind blowing.

DEWS: So even given some of the events that have been happening throughout that year, throughout Europe and even elsewhere, it sounds like you and everybody else was pretty surprised about what was happening on that particular day.

STELZENMÜLLER: Yes. And the thing is, in some ways of course there had been a lot of predictors. There had been a lot of foreshadowing of this. Of course throughout the spring and summer, and in fact in the years before there had been Solidarność in Poland, the shipyard workers, and steel yard workers movement that was trying to unseat the communists, and that had I think in March, one parliamentary election for the first time that was a stunning upset.

Then the Hungarian Government, meeting with others at this Green Border as it was called, that was secured only by a little bit of razor wire and wire netting, and ceremonially cutting through the wire netting so that hundreds, and I think thousands of people who had been trying to get through there, just walked, or ran rather, through into safety, into Austria, and later on into Germany.

There was the Velvet Revolution in Prague, and things were really moving in Europe in ways that had previously been considered completely unthinkable.

But I think that as for East Germany, the East Germans were famously considered by the other countries' members of the Warsaw Pact as being more Catholic than the Pope. In other words, they were more communist than the

Communists in Moscow.

And as we now know from the work of historians, the Russians who were going through their own thaw, namely Glasnost under Mikhail Gorbachev, who was a young and charismatic leader, and who understood very clearly that the communist regime, not just in Russia, but elsewhere was doomed, for a variety reasons, not least economic, because they were heavily indebted, because their economies were non-competitive on international markets, and of course because they had been outspent in the nuclear arms race.

And they realized that their citizens were becoming more and more restive. And there are these very funny stories about senior Soviet diplomats going to East Berlin in the summer and fall of 1989 and talking to these gerontocratic, rigid old East German Communists, whose mentality was rooted in the 1930s in Stalinism, and saying, you know, you guys really need to do a reality check here. You have to open the window and look outside because things are really changing and you might lose it.

And the East Germans didn't heed the warnings of these Russians, and they paid the price, because suddenly the Wall came down.

DEWS: There was something about a miscommunication, or the border guards didn't shoot, and the crossing got opened up.

STELZENMÜLLER: Yes. So, here's what happened. For the East German civil society and civil society activists had seen what was going on in Poland and Hungary in particular, taking heart from this and had taken to marching with candles

clearly determined to be nonviolent.

There was also not really a unified leadership of this. These were just people meeting in churches saying, we've had enough. This needs to change, and we're going to go marching around on Mondays -- these were the famous Monday demonstrations -- until something happens.

And as we also now know, and some people knew at the time, the East German regime had lined up armed forces, armed domestic police forces in side streets of these demonstrations who had been told that they might be given an order to shoot. And miraculously this never happened.

And for many East Germans the actual tipping point of this movement came in October when the biggest of all the marchers, I think with 70,000 people took place in Leipzig. I think it was October 9 or 10, and it was clear that the regime forces in the side streets were completely outnumbered and also totally at a loss of how to deal with this enormous manifestation of opposition.

And that was when it became clear that the end of the regime was near. And it was only a matter of time. And then there was this famous press conference on November 9th, when I think the Interior Minister of the GDR, Günter Schabowski said in a press conference, misunderstanding a piece of paper that he'd just been handed which was supposed to tell him that there was going to be a limited opening of the border crossings, looked at this and said, I think the border is open now -- I'm being told the border is open.

And then he was asked by people in the press conference what he meant. And

he said, well, I think as of now, and I think completely. And the Mayor of West Berlin, Walter Momper, decided to just take him at his word, and people just came to the border crossing and say to the guards, you need to open this now, you've been told to open it.

And huge quantities of people arrived from the Eastern side and the border guards basically called up, frantically, to ask what they were supposed to do, and were told to do whatever they thought was best. And they just opened the borders, and that was it.

So the Wall didn't actually physically fall but it was that night when people were emboldened enough to take hammers and picks to it, started chopping off pieces, and in the end it was completely dismantled. There are chunks of it standing on university campuses in the United States and elsewhere. Tourists have taken tiny little painted chunks. They were always painted with graffito on the western side of the wall.

So you will find these little chunks in a lot of people's apartments lying around. That's the end of a feared monument.

DEWS: It's so powerful to see a piece of that wall anywhere in a museum. Wow.

STELZENMÜLLER: I've got a piece in my office right in the building.

DEWS: So in your essay you used the phrase, "end of history" coined by Francis Fukuyama in his famous book. Can you talk about the end of history, that concept?

STELZENMÜLLER: So, Francis Fukuyama has been much maligned for saying in his essay in 1989 that basically this moment, the disintegration of communist rule in much of Eastern Europe, which then presaged the end of the Warsaw Pact, and in fact the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, and ultimately the entry of most of the members of the Warsaw Pact into NATO and the EU, saying that this was the victory of liberal democracy.

That there was going to be some sort of liberal democratic entropy around the world, everybody was going to want to be like us, and all we needed was to help people along the path, that we were now the only functional model for the future.

And I think that if you go back to Francis Fukuyama's original essay, it's much more subtle than that. It's just been terribly simplified, as it were, by its readers. But I think the simplification at the time was forgivable because the events of the summer and the fall were really so miraculous.

I think nobody who was a student of the Cold War had ever thought it possible that the superpower standoff in Europe could end in any other way than bloodshed. And remember that the brutal takedown of the Tiananmen Square Movement had also happened in June of that year, and everybody, including me, was terrified that the democratic, peaceful revolutions of Eastern Europe would end in exactly that way.

So, I think the feeling was, by the end of 1989 and then German reunification in 1990, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, all of this is so miraculous. You know, maybe miracles do exist. I think we all became Catholic, as it were, for a

moment.

And of course now we're seeing kind of a counterpunch of history, if you will. We're seeing an authoritarian moment certainly in the world, and we're seeing it not just in the world at large, but we're seeing it in Russia where Westerners had hoped after 1989 that Russia at some point would also transform and join the West. We're seeing it in member states of the European Union, like Hungary and Poland. And we've certainly seen a surge of ethno nationalists, xenophobic, nativist populace across the West including in my own country, Germany, and in this country.

So I'm not saying that that counterpunch is superseding the democratic moment. In fact, we're now seeing a little movement in the other direction with elections, say, in Turkey, in Istanbul, we're seeing the Swiss who have been so far quite conservative on most points, have just had a green surge in elections this weekend.

We've seen an Austrian populist coalition dismantled. It turns out that the populists, once they are in power or in government, are really quite inept at staying in power, and that maybe is a good thing, although it's nothing to be smug about.

DEWS: What do you think that says then about the way that we interpret major historical events as they're happening, as we're living through them, but then also looking back 30 years over what's happened? You say that Fukuyama was more subtle than what we gave him credit for, but we also know history is very contingent upon lots of different things happening.

STELZENMÜLLER: Yeah, I think that it's so emotionally understandable. I

so empathize with this need to take the moment of 1989, this moment of amazing grace, as I called it in my essay, as a prefiguration of the future, because it was -- I mean this is why I sobbed in front of the TV, it was such a marvelous gift. So I understand the temptation to misread it. But it was misread, and it was misread both by America, and it was misread by the Germans.

I think that in America it was misread as -- to use the famous formula by Charles Krauthammer -- the beginning of the American unipolar moment, American dominance forever, and the dominance of the American model. And in Germany it was misread as a victory of the German model of atonement, pacifism, reconciliation, and rather than us having to catch up with the rest of the world and the rest of Europe since 1945, this was now the world catching up with us.

And I think it entrenched both in America and in Germany a certain form of cultural and political hubris, about the invincibility of our models that I think has since been slapped down quite comprehensively by history, which doesn't take kindly to this kind of simplification.

DEWS: So now here we are 30 years later, you have this excellent essay, it's available on the Brookings website for everyone to read.

STELZENMÜLLER: Thank you for the plug. (Laughter)

DEWS: Certainly. Talk about some of the overriding themes that you discuss in the essay, rooted in where we are now.

STELZENMÜLLER: Right.

DEWS: And looking forward to kind of the moment that we're in

geopolitically in Europe and across the world.

STELZENMÜLLER: So, basically, when I was asked to write this essay I said, folks, you know, I was a 27-year-old clueless graduate student when this happened, and I'm not a politician, and I'm not a historian. I'm not going to be able to provide particular insights from archival research or from my experience as an actor. If anything, I was totally an object of history, and I was a really confused and ignorant one as well.

But then I thought, well maybe that's the way to describe this because I think the arc between 1989 and the current moment is one where I may after all be representative, in that I had to learn both in my life as a journalist, and later as a think tanker, how much more complicated all these questions are, than just a simple, you know, now we have the unipolar moment.

Or, because we've been so good at atonement now everybody will want to be like us. It is much more complicated. So in the essay I discuss what I learned in those 30 years about war, and peace, and the politics of memory, about prosperity and inequality, about freedom and identity. And I used my journalistic experience to discuss that.

I am currently embarking on writing a book and I think I might go into much greater detail on much of this, but suffice it to say that the learning curve for Germany, and for Europeans, and I think for America, has been pretty steep since then, and it's not over yet.

DEWS: I just want to quote from your essay, it's something I referenced a

few minutes ago about history and contingency, but of course you put it much more nicely. I'll quote here, "The ultimate lesson of 1989 then is this, history was never linear and inevitable. It was then and is now the product of decisions, of choices, of freedoms and responsibilities taken." That seems like a kind of a universal statement of the times that we're living in.

STELZENMÜLLER: Yes, exactly.

DEWS: And the times that you're living in.

STELZENMÜLLER: Well, and the thing is, I think if I had to boil down my message into one key point, it is that phrases like the "end of history", "the unipolar moment", I think absolve both leaders and civil societies from the responsibility to make decisions, to take a stand, to act and to think. Because they suggest that the course of history is inevitable, that we are like leaves on the water of a big river.

And this is not true. We're human beings and we have choices, and when we do not act, or do not take a stand, or do not think that is a choice as well.

DEWS: Well, Constanze, I want to thank you for spending time with me today and talking about your terrific essay, *Thirty Years After The End Of History: Elements Of An Education*, you can find it on our website, Brookings.edu. Thank you.

STELZENMÜLLER: Thank you so much. It was a pleasure, as always.

WESSEL: I'm David Wessel, and this is my economic update.

Three years ago, we at the Hutchins Center at Brookings built a computer game that allows anyone to do what Congress and the President have been unable to

do, stop the Federal debt from rising inexorably.

Today the Federal debt stands at about 78 percent of the annual output of the economy, the GDP. That's twice what it was before the Great Recession, higher than at any time since the end of World War II. Now, so far the Federal Government has had no problem borrowing money, indeed it's borrowing at interest rates that are extraordinarily low.

But the Congressional Budget Office projects that without some changes in tax or spending policies the debt will climb to 144 percent of GDP by 2049. Now no one knows when will hit the tipping point, the danger point, but it would be, to say the least, imprudent to plan on the debt growing faster than the GDP forever.

So our game, the Fiscal Ship, www.FiscalShip.org, is a little different from some of the other online Federal budget exercises which are basically spreadsheets devoid of any values or politics.

We start by asking you to pick your goals for government, your values, fight climate change, shrink inequality, invest in the future, bolster national defense, cut taxes or shrink the size of government, some left, some right. And only after you pick your goals do we ask you to choose from about 100 tax and spending options both increases and decreases.

To win the game, you have to pick those policies that both achieve your goals for government and stop the Federal debt from rising above today's level.

The game has been played by more than half a million people in the last few years, about a thousand people play it every day, and we're proud of that.

I've played the game in person with groups of college students, and that has been a very interesting experience. So here are a few observations:

One, computer games like this, known in the trade as serious games, are a very good way to get people engaged in public policy discussions, much better than PowerPoint presentations on a stage. People play the game on a laptop, or tablet, or even on a phone in groups of two or three, and they take the choices seriously. You can overhear them say, should we raise the Social Security retirement age? Are we in favor of a carbon tax? Many of the conversations are much more sober and thoughtful than the ones we see on cable TV or on the floor of Congress.

Two, players learned very quickly that little tweaks won't solve the fiscal problem. You can't get very far by cutting subsidies for Amtrak, or eliminating foreign aid, or killing the Education Department.

Three, most, though not all college students with whom we've played the game, pick the same goals, fight climate change, invest in the future and reduce inequality. They like taxes, the carbon tax is popular, and we've recently added the wealth tax as an option, perhaps because it's easier to win the game without big spending cuts if you're willing to raise taxes a lot. They also are prepared to make cuts in Social Security and Medicare benefits even if that may be unpopular with their parents or grandparents.

Four, students recognize that winning our game is a lot easier on a laptop in our auditorium than getting any package of tax and spending changes through Congress. They sometimes observe correctly that we haven't figured out how to

incorporate the politics of the budget into the game. We're still thinking about that.

Five, several of them want to know why we haven't yet incorporated the potential increase in tax revenues from legalizing marijuana. So, we'll probably add that option.

Mostly though, watching and listening to college students play the Fiscal Ship game gives me a bit of hope. They're serious, thoughtful, inquisitive, engaged and passionate. Washington could use more of that these days.

DEWS: The Brookings Cafeteria Podcast is the product of an amazing team of colleagues, starting with Audio Engineer, Gaston Reboredo; and Producer, Chris McKenna. Bill Finan, Director of The Brookings Institution Press, does many of our book interviews, and Lisette Baylor and Eric Abalahin provide design and web support. Our intern this fall is Irwin Fein. Finally -- my thanks to Camilo Ramirez and Emily Horne for their guidance and support.

The Brookings Cafeteria is brought to you by the Brookings Podcast Network, which also produces Dollar & Sense, the Current and our Events Podcasts.

Email your questions and comments to me at BCP@Brookings.edu. If you have a question for a scholar, include an audio file and I'll play it and the answer on the air. Follow us on Twitter @PolicyPodcasts. You can listen to The Brookings Cafeteria in all the usual places.

Visit us online at Brookings.edu. Until next time, I'm Fred Dews.

* * * * *

CERTIFICATE OF NOTARY PUBLIC

I, Carleton J. Anderson, III do hereby certify that the forgoing electronic file when originally transmitted was reduced to text at my direction; that said transcript is a true record of the proceedings therein referenced; that I am neither counsel for, related to, nor employed by any of the parties to the action in which these proceedings were taken; and, furthermore, that I am neither a relative or employee of any attorney or counsel employed by the parties hereto, nor financially or otherwise interested in the outcome of this action.

Carleton J. Anderson, III

(Signature and Seal on File)

Notary Public in and for the Commonwealth of Virginia

Commission No. 351998

Expires: November 30, 2020