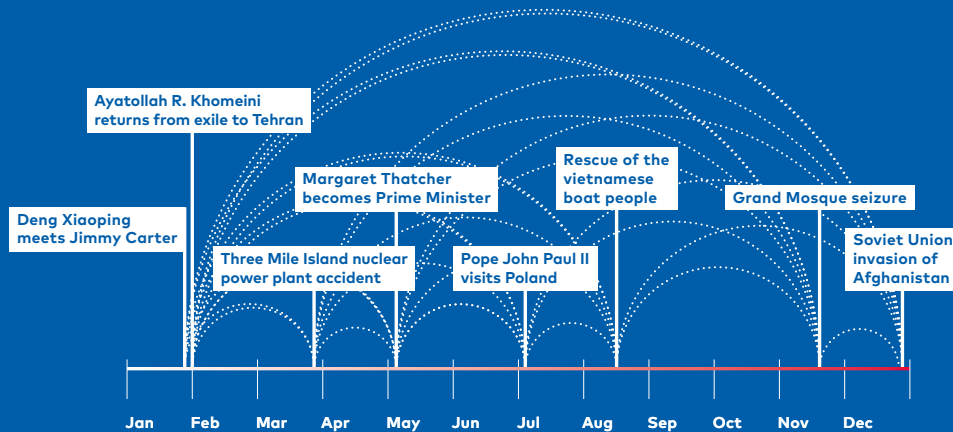




»Is There No Alternative?«

Crisis year 1979

Concepts of crisis



Day in, day out, the same news. No, not the same, just similar: wars, conflicts, assassinations, an oil tanker in distress, a refugee boat. A forest is burning down—but where exactly? And Britain—are they still on board? One often finds oneself drowning and suffocating in a flood of disturbing news from the surrounding world. The question of whether one may or should react by becoming numb or by being angry confronts everyone several times a day.

As the historian Rüdiger Graf explains, the classical concept of crisis defined the present as a decision-making situation in which human action was required to prevent a threatening catastrophe. Although this understanding dominated during the inflationary crisis diagnoses of the 1920s and 1930s, it transformed in the 1970s as people grew skeptical about the ability to actively shape the future. Amid complex global energy and environmental crises, the concept of crisis lost its meaning as a transitional stage on the way to a better future. For some, withdrawal from technical progress seemed to be the only conceivable solution.

Both extremes—total powerlessness and unconditional optimism for progress—are naturally one-sided. The potential of a crisis lies in the possibility of it developing a language of its own that touches on both the private and the public. At the Leibniz Centre for Contemporary Historical Research in Potsdam, it is generally assumed that only in the narrative does the complexity of the contexts of events become reduced or intensified to such an extent that they can become a »crisis.« In order to cope with this situation, shifts in perception must be deconstructed and, in the discourse among experts and the general public alike, decisions regarding direction must be examined. In doing so, it is necessary to consider how previous crises have been quelled, allowing for a comparison between proven methods and new approaches.

Crises, according to historian Frank Bösch, never exist without the public perceiving a social challenge that it views as fundamentally threatening and requiring radical decisions be made under the pressure of time. In a recently published book, he explored how global crises interact and influence each other through an analysis of the crises of 1979, the interplay of which formed a »turning point« in many parts of the world: the Iranian revolution and the admission of the boat people from Vietnam; the fundamental reforms in China, which has since become a global economic power; Margaret Thatcher's proclamation of a lack of alternatives to neoliberal thinking in the wake of the world economic crisis; and the spread of ecological positions with the Green Party, not least as a result of a nuclear power accident and the second oil crisis.

The tensions between capitalism and ecological concerns, global citizenship and local roots, secularization and religious segregation are already becoming evident. After the initial crisis of European unification in the mid-1970s, it stabilized at the end of the 1970s with the first European elections and the European Monetary System. In this respect, a look back shows the scope for action that arises from crises: To understand events not individually but as a context is a task that is all the more important in a communicatively networked society such as ours.