

11/09/1989

The Fall of the Berlin Wall:

The End of an Unharmonious Relationship

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Today a tourist attraction, the Brandenburger Gate in Berlin once was part of the prohibited area of East Germany (GDR).

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The Night the Wall opened

Sometimes history happens very suddenly. In the political interaction between people, most processes take place rather slowly, often unnoticed by contemporaries, almost under the radar. But there are days when you wake up and the world has become a completely different place. This was the case on November 9, 1989, when not only the Wall fell, which had enclosed the inhabitants of the GDR in their country, but the world took on a new order as a result. The fall of the Wall and the end of the Cold War had an impact on regions as far away as Africa, South America and Asia. However, that was not yet foreseeable on that day.

Yet, everything had begun rather unremarkably on this November 9th, 1989. The Politburo of the SED, which – since the founding of the GDR in 1949 – was the sole ruling communist party, had scheduled a press conference from which no one expected anything significant. It was only the second of its kind, after a protest movement that had been growing for months had forced the first changes in the GDR. In October, the party chairman and head of state, Erich Honecker, had been forced to resign. The younger SED politician Egon Krenz had taken his place – but this was not a fundamental change. So, no one expected anything special from this press conference.

But things turned out differently. At around 7 p.m., Günter Schabowski, a member of the Central Committee, announced that the SED leadership had passed a new travel law. In the future, every GDR citizen is allowed to apply to leave the country. That was news though! Up to that date, only certain individuals had been allowed to travel to the West, for example or those who had close relatives in West Germany and a very special reason for traveling. Citizens who wanted to emigrate to the West and who had applied to leave had been harassed and sometimes imprisoned. Now, foreign travel and permanent leave should be permitted. Asked when the new regulation would come into force, the poorly informed Schabowski replied, "That takes effect according to my knowledge.... immediately, without delay." Western media picked up on the sensation of the immediate opening of the border – furthering the misunderstanding – just a few

minutes later. The *Tagesschau*, the main West German TV news program, broadcast it on the eight o'clock news.

The news spread like wildfire in Berlin. In the course of the evening, more and more people came from East Berlin to the border checkpoints to try out the announced freedom of movement. Since everything was based on a double misunderstanding, neither the officers of the border troops nor the passport control units of the State Security (Stasi) knew what they should do: They had no new orders. As the crowds of people gathered relentlessly chanted "Open the gate!" and "We'll be back!" and threatened to overwhelm each other, the officer in charge at the *Bornholmer Straße* (street) border crossing, Harald Jäger, made a momentous decision. He had repeatedly and futilely requested orders from his superiors, but no one wanted to take responsibility. About half an hour before midnight, Jäger decided to open the border crossing and soon others followed.

The East Berliners pouring into West Berlin were greeted with cheers by a still disbelieving but hopeful crowd that had also gathered on the west side of the border crossings. East Berliners were welcomed with champagne and strangers lay crying in each other's arms. Many organized for the first time family reunions. In West Berlin, where no one was prepared for such a rush was a cheerful exceptional situation for several days.

A story should explain how people experienced this event. The East Berlin pastor, Werner Krätschell, was driving to West Berlin that night by car with his 20-year-old daughter and her friend. The girls were a bit scared but were full of eager anticipation. The first shock came to them when they crossed the border, because the passport control officers had received new orders in the meantime: They stamped every passport presented to them as "invalid." The people who crossed the border were not allowed to return. However, in the moment of fear – thinking of how his two small children had been left sleeping at home and that his wife knew nothing about the trip – the controllers received new orders: Everyone was to be allowed to return. Nevertheless, as

soon as they arrived in West Berlin, they decided to return home immediately. The daughter, however, asked to stop, because she wanted to set foot on Western soil at least once. Krätschell later compared her experience at that moment with that of Neil Armstrong when he set foot on the moon.

But this night was not just a boisterous mass reunion. Many were aware that they were living through a historic moment. Some West and East Berliners who had just crossed the Wall returned to it. Celebrating people climbed the Wall at the Brandenburg Gate – which was particularly thick and therefore had room to spare – and the border guards on the East side of the Wall had to tolerate this without intervening. Still in the night, some began to destroy the wall with whatever tools were at hand. However, the border guards attempted to mend the damages the following day, but the message was clear: The people of the GDR and Berlin would not tolerate another closure of the despised Wall.

That night, the Wall took on a new “identity”, although the political development that ultimately led to unification was not yet finalized. However, with the images of people celebrating on the Wall and beginning to destroy it, the Wall went from being a symbol of oppression to a symbol of overcoming a dictatorship. At the same hour, a relationship ended that had been characterized by mistrust and lack of harmony on both sides between the SED and the citizens of the GDR.

A development had begun that proved to be irreversible. The weakened party leadership of the SED could not bring itself to close the Wall again. Contrarily, on the same day, border guards began to break the first real hole in the Wall at *Bernauer Straße* (street) for a new border crossing. The opening of the Wall was final, and it ushered in the accelerated end of the dictatorship that the SED had established just over forty years earlier.

The End of the War and the Division of Germany

The opening of the Wall marked the end of a story that began after the Second World War, with which Nazi Germany had thrown Europe into. The main Allies of the anti-Hitler coalition together occupied Germany in May 1945: the Soviet Union, the United States, Great Britain and France. Each of the four powers received an occupation zone: the Soviet Union the east, the British the northwest, the French the southwest, and the Americans the south. Large parts in the east of the former German Reich were annexed by the Soviet Union and Poland.

The allies, however, became estranged from each other quite quickly and mutual distrust grew. While initially the Soviet Union and France jointly advocated to receive as much compensation as possible for the damage done by the Germans in their countries, the Americans and British began to worry for and prioritize their influence in the world. Conflicts arose between the Western powers and the Soviet Union over the demarcation of zones of influence in Europe and the Middle East. Leaders in East and West developed different ideas about Germany's future. Finally, among the public and the governments in Great Britain and the USA fears finally grew when the Soviet Union established dependent occupied states in Eastern Europe. In addition to that, the Soviet Union helped communist parties to power and introduced its model of rule and economical system in these countries.

The Soviet Union wanted to create a belt of dependent states for its security, which served as a buffer between it and the Western powers. The rulers in the Kremlin had not forgotten that the United States and Great Britain had sent intervention troops shortly after the 1917 revolution to restore the old order. In the West, on the other hand, there were fears that the Soviet Union would expand further westward; Germany, France and Italy were considered unsafe. Although the Soviet Union, whose western territories had been largely destroyed in the war, was primarily concerned with rebuilding its economy and securing its conquests.

In any case, the former allies, eyeing each other suspiciously, could not come to an agreement on how to shape Germany's future. The Soviet dictator, Joseph Stalin, had sent – together with the Soviet troops – the Communist party leaders previously exiled by the Nazis from Germany back to East Germany. The formerly exiled leaders, aided by Stalin, were set about establishing a dictatorship – modeled after the Soviet Union – under the leadership of Walter Ulbricht. This, and fears of possible Soviet expansion, led the American and, soon, the British and French governments to bring their occupation zones closer together – first economically and then politically. The Soviet politicians, increasingly isolated in this round but hardly willing to compromise, insisted that no decision on Germany's future was possible without their agreement. They were soon to be disappointed in this view. Since February 1948, at the insistence of the US government, which had been increasingly anti-Soviet since the change from President Franklin D. Roosevelt to Harry S. Truman, the representatives of the governments of the United States, Great Britain, France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg met. Because an agreement with the Soviet Union had not been reached at the conference of foreign ministers in late 1947, their representatives were not invited. The recommendation made in June was to form a democratic state in Germany out of the three western zones. At the same time, the Americans, with German support, carried out a currency reform in the three western zones, further deepening the division of Germany. Members of the state parliaments formed a Parliamentary Council, which drafted the *Grundgesetz* (Basic Law or Constitution), the provisional constitution of the future state. It was promulgated on May 23, 1949, and with it established the Federal Republic (what would commonly be called, West Germany).^[1]

The Soviet government tried to stop this development at the last minute, using Berlin, which was also divided into four sectors, as pawn. In June 1948, they imposed a blockade on West Berlin, which the Western powers countered with an airlift. If food and coal could not reach Berlin by road, river or rail, the Western Allies brought them by air. The Soviets had wanted to undermine confidence in the Western powers with the blockade and achieved the opposite. During this time, not only did the three Western

powers move closer together, but in the eyes of the Germans and especially the Berliners, the allies went from occupying to protecting powers. Additionally, the Germans were no longer seen as the defeated, but rather allies. Defeated by the airlift, the Soviet government finally lifted the blockade in May 1949. In the meantime, however, the SED had tried to gain power over the entire city of Berlin. It had not succeeded, partly because of the persistence of the Social Democrats, although the result was the political division of the city.

With the founding of the Federal Republic and the Berlin Crisis of 1948 /49, Berlin became a permanent focus of conflict in the Cold War. Only the construction of the Wall in 1961 brought relief in this respect, even though it cemented the division and brought considerable suffering to families and friends separated by the Wall in East and West Berlin. The building of the Wall, in part, convinced the people and the government of the Federal Republic that the previous policy of non-recognition of the GDR and non-communication had outlived its usefulness. With the change to a social-liberal coalition, an initially tentative rapprochement between the two German states began in the 1960s, culminating in the treaties with the East in the early 1970s. This brought significant relief to the people of divided Berlin and created numerous opportunities for contact between the two German states. Finally, in 1973, it led to the joint admission of the Federal Republic and the GDR to the UN. This laid the foundations for a lasting policy of détente, which was used to force the GDR government to comply with certain legal standards.



The memorial in Berlin's Treptow Park was built by the Red Armed Forces after the end of the war in 1947 to commemorate the fallen Russian soldiers. The memorial is located in former West Berlin and was guarded by Soviet guards during the period of divided Germany.

Dictatorship, Migration Movement and Border Regime

The construction of the Wall and international recognition brought a certain degree of normalization to GDR society that otherwise would not have been expected given the conflict that defined the GDR's beginnings. The communist party leaders, when they imposed their political model in East Germany with Soviet support, had neither hoped for nor received the approval of the people living there. While the political elite believed that the GDR embodied the better Germany, the SED never succeeded in politically winning over a majority of the population – despite intensive propaganda, repression and intensive integration efforts. For this reason, the SED's rule in the GDR was characterized by permanent insecurity and by a sometimes more, sometimes less pronounced mistrust towards the population.

The SED, which had emerged from the KPD (German communist party) in 1946, initially ousted the other political parties. However, unlike in other Eastern Bloc countries, other parties remained in existence. As so-called *bloc parties*, they were condemned to a marginal existence dominated by the SED. The historically influential Social Democrats were integrated into the SED under pressure in 1946 and, as a consequence, had little power to shape future policy. The numerous mass organizations, such as trade unions or the Women's League, which the SED liked to rely on for legitimacy, were also dependent on the SED. Furthermore, the SED personally filled leadership roles within these organizations. To solidify its one-party dictatorship, the SED wrote a "leading role" for itself into the constitution of the GDR in 1968.

The SED built an economy centrally controlled by its committees in order to achieve social justice. Yet, in reality, it functioned very poorly. Even in the long term, it failed to meet the needs of the population, specifically within the markets of housing and consumer goods and food. A steady supply of food was not always assured, and there were often long waiting lists for certain goods, such as cars. Additionally, in order to achieve state control, previously independent companies – even down to small

enterprises – had been expropriated. Farmers, who had been independent until the 1950s, were forced into agricultural production cooperatives. By harming a considerable part of the population through expropriations, without ever achieving the consumption goals they had established, the SED alienated a substantial portion of society.

With the GDR, a state had been created in which many of its citizens were latently dissatisfied, both because of the lack of political participation and also because of the insufficient provision of services and goods compared to the West. The general mistrust the SED had of its population and its efforts to bring the population into line through educational measures led to a massive state intervention in many areas of life. Consequently, most citizens only had very little agency to exercise within their own lives. Additionally, they were required to continuously and demonstratively show their loyalty. For example, loyalty was shown by becoming members of SED-affiliated organizations, "voluntarily" participating in state-organized actions or by taking part in the SED's routine political demonstrations. The vast system of centralization within the GDR meant that citizens were monitored and controlled even outside the usual mechanisms of state security (Stasi). When dissatisfied people changed jobs or schools, they found similar acting party officials everywhere and had a corresponding personal file "following" them. So, there were few possibilities or means of living outside the system. Dissenters, who did not even have political sentiments, but merely lived non-conformist lives, quickly felt the force of the state, and were subject to criminalization.

Expropriations, political, economic and social discontent and state coercion brought about a rapidly growing migration movement to the Federal Republic. This was further encouraged by the fact that residents of the GDR were recognized as citizens in the Federal Republic without any adversity or impediments. There was an admission procedure but due to the non-recognition policy, every refugee from the GDR was already considered a federal citizen. Issuing an identity card was a mere formality. Due to the economic boom that began in West Germany in the 1950s, refugees could hope to quickly catch – especially materially – up with the already higher standard of living in

the West. When the Wall was built in 1961, one-sixth of the population had already left the GDR.

The SED was increasingly concerned about the consistently growing movement of refugees in the 1950s. Not only were well-educated workers leaving, but also the youth, since about half of the refugees were under 25 years old. In addition, the SED perceived the flow of refugees as an encroachment on its power in the GDR. From their point of view, they eluded their grasp, and the very possibility of flight reduced their ability to impose their ideas of order on the remaining citizens.

In response, the SED established a border regime designed to prevent migration. This border regime began in Berlin when, after the blockade, border controls were implemented to purposefully limit the movement and accessibility between East and West Berlin and between surrounding areas. The first attempts to criminalize the refugees followed in the early 1950s. Since 1954, and increasingly in 1958, the GDR's passport law made it a punishable offense to leave the country without permission: *Republikflucht* (fleeing the GDR) was penalized by imprisonment.

Based on Berlin's experience during the blockade and the use of this practice in the Soviet Union since the 1920s, the SED began to seal off the GDR's borders. Beginning in May 1952, the inner-German border was fortified with barriers that, while not yet impermeable, significantly increased the risk of arrest for non-locals. A border order, issued at the same time, made entry into the five-kilometer-wide border area subject to an authorization requirement and prohibited anyone from entering or encroaching on a ten-meter-wide strip directly on the border. The GDR border police were ordered to shoot at fugitives if they could not prevent an escape in any other way.

Until 1961, however, it was relatively safe to cross Berlin into the West. The city was divided politically, but both halves of the city were still freely accessible. Thus, GDR citizens could travel to East Berlin and from there reach the West. This changed in August 1961, when the SED had a wall built around West Berlin. This was intended to

end the escape movement once and for all. Moreover, the SED intended it to consolidate its sovereignty over the GDR, not just symbolically. At the same time, the border fortifications on the inner-German border were reinforced and even equipped with minefields; later, self-firing devices followed. About 650 people died as a result of this border regime by 1989.

With the increasingly robust border regime, the GDR's inhabitants were largely barred from going west. However, this did not put an end to many people's sentiments; their dissatisfaction remained. Despite the dangers involved, people continued to try to cross the border, which was fortified with obstacles. Since 1961, about 40,000 have managed to escape, and by 1989 another 500,000 reached the West by other means. Estimates suggest that about 75,000 people were arrested and punished while trying to escape or preparing to do so. The fight against those attempting to flee, who continued to be perceived as a threat by the SED and who were increasingly being treated as enemies of the state, considerably strengthened the character of the GDR as a police state. The already high density of surveillance was increased even further by the border regime, which, of course, did not diminish the dissatisfaction.

Opposition and End of the GDR

Since there was no longer an outlet by migration and no one by protest, discontent within the GDR increased in the late 1970s and in the 1980s. On the one hand, this was due to the fact that the SED was not permanently able to realize its promises of material security. Many GDR citizens had access to Western television and compared their standard of living to what was seen as the standard in Western media. The comparison was not in favor of the GDR. In addition, a new generation was growing up that was influenced by the libertarian currents that had been established in the West since the 1960s, and it was less willing to let the SED dictate their way of life.

Opposition had always existed in the GDR, but it remained a marginal phenomenon until the 1980s. The opposition was unable to assert itself against the system of state repression that was backed by Soviet troops and mechanisms for social integration by means of upward social mobility and other state efforts. Berliners from both halves of the city had previously taken part in the protests against the division of the city in the fall of 1948. After the death of Josef Stalin in 1953, discontent culminated in a nationwide uprising that was put down after a few days with the help of the Soviet army. Even after the Wall was built in 1961, spontaneous protests occurred, especially in East Berlin. Nevertheless, police, state security and SED propaganda forces quickly put them down.

In addition, part of the population, even if it was not prepared to protest openly, maintained a certain distance from the SED state and its values. This was especially true for the middle-class and church milieus, where other values were taught and lived. But young people also developed alternative lifestyles, for example – the rocker movement and later the hippie and punk movements. They felt patronized and found the Western lifestyle they witnessed on television and radio attractive. Even within the ruling SED, which had initially defined itself as an emancipatory force, there were still skeptical voices before it degenerated into an exclusively cadre-based party. However, these non-

conformists and oppositionists did not find a sufficient base and, like the helpless protests that were against building the Wall, failed.

The situation changed in the 1980s. Influenced by Western models, an opposition movement developed from local environmental, peace and women's rights groups, most of which found shelter within the Protestant church. Independently of this, a growing unease arose among the population, especially among the younger generation, in the face of outdated machinery in factories, limited consumer options and decaying inner cities. Many gained the impression that, contrary to official promises and pronouncements, their country was on the decline. They wished for a functioning community and saw a positive alternative in the Federal Republic, which they knew and recognized from the media.

Dissidents, young people who were upset by state repression and a generally disillusioned population came together in 1988/89 to form a growing protest movement. Initially focused on reforms and political participation, the protests changed their character in the fall of 1989 due to the impression that the Eastern bloc was dissolving and an increasing movement of refugees and emigrants. The SED leadership essentially lost any vestige of credibility among the population. Even though there was some police action against demonstrators at the beginning, the SED did not ultimately use violence to secure its power. Unlike the Communist Party in China, which had protests bloodily put down in the summer of 1989 and used violence as its last resort. SED leadership had to resign in early November. The new Politburo decided to tentatively open the border in November 1989, whereupon the Wall collapsed on November 9 under the overwhelming onslaught of citizens.

With the opening of the Wall and freedom of movement finally permitted, the dictatorship of the SED had lost its most important pillar. Its new leadership acted increasingly helpless, losing credibility even within the party. In the elections to the *Volkskammer* (the unicameral legislature of the GDR) in March 1990, the first free

elections in the GDR, the SED, renamed to PDS, received barely 17 percent of the vote. Parties that demanded rapid unification with the Federal Republic emerged victorious from this election. With the fall of the Wall, the revolutionary momentum seemed to have died down a bit. Because of the lack of competent and unencumbered elites within their own country and compounded by the population's desire for a rapid improvement on their living conditions, the democratic revolution resulted in the absorption of the East German states into the Federal Republic.

This meant a new chapter in the history of the Federal Republic. The people of East Germany were given the rule of law and an, even if slow, improvement of their living conditions. At the same time, they entered a phase of relearning and acclimatization that was painful for many. For a lot of people, it was associated with a sense of losing ground, and not everyone benefited equally from unification.

Migration, Borders, Flight

The closely linked histories of the Federal Republic and the GDR were essentially defined by migration. In the Federal Republic, the numbers of refugees in the 1950s were proclaimed as the triumph of the Western model of society over the Eastern one. In reaction to the building of the Wall, which largely stopped the movement of refugees, a more plain policy prevailed. Both sides attempted rapprochement without denying the fundamental differences between East and West and giving up their own claims. The SED had always seen migration as a threat to its own power and criminalized and persecuted it accordingly. This emphatically demonstrated the state and party leadership's fundamental distrust of the population. However, its border regime was crucial in bringing about its demise as the GDR's state party. The demand for freedom of travel was among the most important in the demonstrations in the fall of 1989.

While many wanted to leave the GDR (500,000 people also went from the Federal Republic to the GDR), the Federal Republic had been a migration-oriented society since its inception, which had to integrate newcomers. This sentiment and practice was grounded in tradition, because a society without migration is hardly imaginable. People have always moved when their circumstances necessitated it – especially when they were looking for freedom, prosperity or security. Thus, the United States emerged out of a movement of colonialists who had been persecuted at home in Europe.

The Federal Republic initially took in a mass of refugees – many displaced – from both formerly held eastern territories and Eastern Europe. By 1950, more than ten million people, which made up around one fifth of the population, had to be integrated into a society that had itself been shattered by the war. In many cases, the newcomers were met with hostility because it was feared that they would take away the already scarce resources and upset the fragilely existing order. The immigrants first had to fight for a place in society. However, the economic boom in the 1950s helped with integration. In addition, there were about three million refugees from the GDR in the years up to 1961.

After the Wall was built, when this influx dried up, immigrants from southern Europe came instead.

In any case, the GDR government's attempts to control migration and restrict freedom of movement – even if the migrants wanted to leave the country at the time and not enter it - contributed significantly to its downfall in the long term due to the associated surveillance, repression and obvious mistrust of the population. Attempts to stop migration with border fortifications and police measures at the borders may be successful in the short term. In the long run, however, they mainly increased suffering – on both sides of the border – and make the integration of migrants more difficult.

Suggested readings

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