

# Before the Fall

*The fall of the Berlin Wall was a dramatic moment in time. In the minds of many East Germans, it was years in the making.*

BY ANDREW CURRY

WE REMEMBER THE FALL OF THE BERLIN WALL in 1989 because it was such a perfect metaphor—joyful Germans running into each other's arms as an entire system crumbled, lighting the night with relief and exhilaration. On November 9, the world celebrates the end of communism and the liberation of millions from decades of oppression.

Today, few remember the years of patient effort by dissidents and activists from Warsaw to Budapest that set the stage for that momentous night. Even in the German Democratic Republic (GDR)—commonly known as East Germany—the beginning of the end happened not in the divided capital of Berlin but in lesser-known cities such as Leipzig, Dresden, and Plauen. In the tumultuous 20 years since the end of communism in Germany and Eastern Europe, the focus on the images of that single night has made it hard to recognize just how much work is necessary for a democracy movement to succeed.

In East Germany, more than in almost any other country in the communist bloc, the events that became synonymous with the end of communism were the fruit of a protest movement that began years before with no hope of toppling the regime. There was

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no great symbolism or strategy. The movement's greatest ambition was to force East Germany—which became one of the communist bloc's most hardcore regimes after its founding in the Soviet-occupied zone of Germany in 1949—to live up to its own ideals. No one imagined bringing down the Communist Party, much less reunifying Germany.

If you had to put your finger on one thing that opened the first cracks in the wall, it might be the American Pershing II missile. When in 1978 NATO announced plans to deploy midrange nuclear missiles in Europe in response to the Soviet nuclear buildup, activists on both sides of the divided country protested the idea of nuclear weapons on German soil. While hundreds of thousands signed petitions and rallied in the West, in the East the protests were used for propaganda purposes by the communist regime, which was happy to see people spontaneously protesting against the United States.

But as the peace movement in the GDR grew, it began asking hard questions about the situation at home. Protestant churches were officially tolerated, though cut off from their counterparts in the West and under constant scrutiny by the authorities. Nonetheless, the church became a safe space for the peace movement, and many ministers organized



Crowds in East Berlin in November 1989 push down a section of the Berlin Wall, which divided East and West Berliners for nearly three decades.

prayers for peace and rallies against militarization, military classes in grade schools, and mandatory army service.

In 1982, Rainer Eppelmann—a pastor well known for organizing blues festivals for disaffected youth at his church in a working-class East Berlin neighborhood—cowrote a call for disarmament that was distributed illegally in East Germany and passed to Western reporters. The “Berlin Appeal” earned him the enmity of the feared East German secret police, known as the Stasi. (After the wall fell, Eppelmann’s Stasi file revealed that for years he had been the target of bugging, surveillance, and a rumor campaign designed to destroy his marriage and his ministry. A plan was even hatched to “eliminate” him in a staged traffic accident.)

“The government told us Pershings and cruise missiles were the tools of the devil, but [Soviet] SS-

13s were doves of peace,” Eppelmann says. “It was a chance for us, as people in the GDR, to stand up and say something about the course of GDR politics and the nuclear arms race.” Peace protesters turned propaganda on its head. “Swords into plowshares”—the subject of a sculpture given as a gift to the United Nations by the Soviet Union—became a slogan. Teenagers sewed patches bearing a stylized image of the sculpture onto their jackets, only to be threatened by teachers and police.

Once the peace movement turned critical of the GDR, it had outlived its welcome, and activists found themselves watched and persecuted. The one safe haven was the church. Around the same time Eppelmann was writing his Berlin Appeal, Christian Führer and Christoph Wonneberger—two young pastors in Leipzig, East Germany’s second-largest city—began holding regular Monday evening prayers for peace at the St. Nicholas Church.

Sheltered by the church, the Monday meetings

were a forum for those who felt that East Germany had betrayed its own ideals. “The church was the one space someone could express themselves,” Führer says. “We had a monopoly on freedom, physically and spiritually.”

Looking back, activists remember a mixture of

**“WE SHOULDN’T GIVE UP,” one East German dissident said, “because if we do there won’t be any hope at all.”**

exhilaration and fear. Sitting in his office at the Forum of Contemporary History in Leipzig, museum historian Uwe Schwabe—a friendly, garrulous man with a long ponytail—remembers feeling transformed when he started attending Monday meetings at St. Nicholas in 1984. He was just out of compulsory service in the East German army. “At 22, I experienced young people talking freely about politics for the first time,” he recalls.

That freedom could be costly: Attending church, let alone prayer meetings, could mean the end of careers or blackballing by universities. Under pressure from the authorities, attendance at the Monday peace prayers shrank to fewer than 10 regulars by the mid-1980s. Gathered in the chilly, centuries-old church in the city’s center, under constant surveillance, they could hardly have been called a movement, much less a threat.

“It wasn’t always easy,” says Führer, a stocky man who still wears the denim vest that became his trademark in the 1980s, when the Monday meetings made him one of the most prominent figures in the East German dissident movement. “Once a participant said to me, ‘We shouldn’t give up, because if we do there won’t be any hope at all.’”

Slowly, word got around. “It was known throughout Germany, and everyone in Leipzig knew about it,” Schwabe says. “The advantage over Berlin or Dresden was that there was this fixed point over years.” The Monday meetings grew. One of the largest con-

stituencies was East Germans who had applied to leave the country. Hopeful emigrants were trapped in a cruel limbo, sometimes waiting years to hear if they’d be allowed to leave. In the meantime, they lost their jobs and were ostracized by friends and neighbors. (Many in the dissident movement, committed

to staying and changing the system, saw them as traitors of a different sort and were reluctant to embrace them; St. Nicholas Church was one of the few places in East Germany where the two groups mixed.)

Others started coming too: environmentalists, conscientious objectors, democracy activists. Each week a different group organized the meeting, connecting people whose only common cause was a desire for change. By February 1988, attendance had swelled to 600. “There was a critical mass,” Führer says. “Activists, émigré applicants, and curious people from all over—everything came together at the peace prayers.”

**L**eipzig’s Monday meetings were a sort of North Star in a rapidly growing constellation of reform-minded citizens’ groups. The thaw was accelerated by events beyond the borders of East Germany. Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in the Soviet Union in 1985, and soon began to implement reforms that gave hope and energy to people all over the Soviet bloc—and exposed the inflexibility of their own leadership. After all, if the Soviet Union, long heralded as the model society by communist parties around the world, was loosening up, why couldn’t East Germany?

At the same time, warming relations with the West gave East German activists more breathing room. (GDR head of state Erich Honecker made his first official visit to West Germany in 1987, and was intent on securing an invitation to Washington.) Jailing prominent dissidents brought quick condemnation from the West, for example. By 1989, Stasi agents were monitoring nearly 200 separate citizens’ groups



**Egon Krenz, who ascended to lead East Germany less than a month before the Berlin Wall fell, was officially inaugurated on October 24, 1989.**

pressing for reform on issues ranging from the environment to travel restrictions.

Much of the unrest was apolitical, but any challenge to the status quo was implicitly a challenge to the ruling party. Still, the popular mood was changing fast. “Normal people were fed up,” says Berlin historian Jens Schöne. “They didn’t want to wait 15 years for a car, they didn’t want to work in a factory; they wanted to be able to travel and buy things.” The fact that the regime never managed to block West German television broadcasts meant that an entire generation of young people born after the 1968 Soviet crackdown in Prague wanted the lives they saw beamed into their living rooms every night.

In 1987, Schöne remembers, the Stasi scrambled to clear the streets of East Berlin when a David Bowie concert in West Berlin prompted hundreds of teens, angry that they couldn’t attend, to gather and chant, “The wall must go.” A year later, the Stasi deployed agents to monitor Michael Jackson while the singer was in West Berlin for a concert. Local groups heading out to plant trees or clean up riverbanks found

themselves blocked by police and scrutinized by the Stasi.

**T**he last straw came on May 7, 1989, when regular elections for local party officials across East Germany were exposed as fraudulent by a loose network of volunteers who observed the vote count at local precincts—a right enshrined in the East German constitution but never before exercised in an organized way—and then gathered in churches to compare results. The discrepancies were reported in samizdat pamphlets and passed to Western reporters. “We could prove the people who were ruling our country were criminal,” Eppelmann says now, his voice still rising with outrage and amazement. “They weren’t satisfied with 70 or 80 percent [of the vote]. They needed almost 100. It was sick—sick, and criminal.”

After a restless spring, summer brought a grim warning of where things could head. In early June, Chinese tanks and soldiers moved in on unarmed



Participants in the so-called Monday demonstrations pray at the St. Nicholas Church in October 1989. The Leipzig church, where worshipers have gathered for more than eight centuries, became a magnet and a beacon for East Germans seeking to protest the policies of the SED regime.

pro-democracy demonstrators gathered in Beijing's Tiananmen Square; hundreds were killed.

For older East Germans, the events in Beijing were no surprise. Those who had lived through World War II remembered the cruelties of the Soviet occupation. And there were more direct parallels. In 1953, workers in 700 East German cities declared their opposition to the Unified Socialist Party of Germany, or SED, the party that was synonymous with the East German state, and demanded the reunification of the country. Soviet soldiers fired on demonstrators, and more than 100 were killed. In the years since, all opposition movements in the Soviet bloc had met the same fate: '53 in Germany, '56 in Hungary, '68 in Prague, '89 in China—that's how communism dealt with critics," Führer says.

In Leipzig, an unofficial street music festival later in the month ended with cellists from the Leipzig orchestra being loaded into police vans. "It was like the Nazis all over again, and people had tears in their eyes," says Tobias Hollitzer, a former environmental activist who now runs a museum in Leipzig devoted to exposing the truth about the Stasi. "It finally touched people who had doubts about what was going on at the St. Nicholas Church."

**T**here was no precedent for a peaceful transition of power. Throughout Germany's history, revolutions had been blood soaked. Even for an ardent peace activist such as Führer, who had spent eight months in jail as a youth rather than serve in the army, political change without violence was practically inconceivable: "It wasn't imaginable that the GDR would end. That they would willingly give up their scepter was unimaginable, and [an opposition movement] taking it by force was equally unimaginable."

In the wake of Tiananmen, a different kind of fear pervaded the Monday peace prayers. Egon Krenz,

who soon would succeed Honecker as SED party leader, visited Beijing days afterward and praised the way the Chinese government had rescued communism from "counterrevolutionary elements." In Leipzig, fear of a "Chinese solution" grew. "People had seen the pictures from Beijing—it wasn't at all clear this would be peaceful," says Schöne.

But behind the scenes, the Soviet Union's dynamic party secretary made it clear to party leaders throughout the bloc that the Soviets were no longer interested

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in intervening in the domestic politics of their neighbors and client states. Despite the presence of nearly a million Soviet soldiers in East Germany, Gorbachev's message was clear: You're on your own. Poland held free elections in June that resulted in a landslide for the Solidarity opposition. Hungary had relaxed border restrictions with Austria and begun its own process of peaceful democratization in the spring.

For the first time, East Germans who wanted to emigrate could make an end run around the Berlin Wall. All summer, thousands of them voted with their feet, fleeing west via Hungary to Austria. Thousands more abandoned their cars on the streets of Prague and climbed over the fence around the West German Embassy, seeking asylum—a feat previously attempted by only a trickle of East Germans over the years. By the end of September, 4,500 were camping on the embassy grounds despite temperatures in the 90s.

The situation was a huge embarrassment for the leadership in East Berlin—on the eve of the GDR's 40th-anniversary celebrations, thousands of people preferred living as refugees to returning. But for those who had been trying to change the system from within, the crisis was almost as great. "People lost friends suddenly. Overnight, your doctor was gone, or

**In Leipzig, peaceful marchers carry candles during an evening protest in 1989. "To hold a candle, you need both hands—one to hold the candle, and the other to keep it from being blown out," says one dissident. "You can't hold a rock with your other hand."**

the baker on the corner disappeared," Schwabe remembers. "Everyone had to come to grips with the future and ask themselves, 'Do I want to stay and change things, or leave?'"

The official reaction from East Berlin toward those who fled was contemptuous. "With their behavior, they've trampled on our values and cut themselves off from our society. One shouldn't shed any tears for them," read an editorial in *Neues Deutschland*, the party's official newspaper. The reaction incensed average citizens, who were realizing that their leaders were completely out of touch. "What an affront," Schwabe says. "These were our brothers, our sisters, people we might not see for 30 years."

**A**fter a summer break (some things in Germany are sacred, no matter the political situation), thousands of people showed up at the St. Nicholas Church on Monday, September 4. In view of Western television cameras in town for a biannual trade show, young protesters in front of the church unfurled a banner demanding freedom of travel. "The Stasi ripped it down and tackled the kids," Führer remembers; millions of East Germans saw the scene broadcast on the news the next day.

A new slogan entered the East German vocabulary: "We're staying here." A week later, the numbers at the church doubled. This time, almost 100 people were arrested and the city center was nearly shut down by the secret police. Too late: Fanned by West German television, the flames had begun to spread. The same day, "Monday Demonstrations" inspired by Leipzig's peace prayers were held at Lutheran churches all over East Germany. A movement eight years in the making was growing exponentially.

Grasping at straws, government officials gave permission for the embassy refugees in Prague and Warsaw to take special, closed trains through East Germany to the West—and slammed the borders with Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland shut. East Germans were now truly prisoners in their own country.

On October 3, word got out that trains full of embassy refugees would be stopping in Dresden on their way west. Thousands descended on the city's train station in an attempt to board what they saw as the last train out of the GDR. "Closing the borders was like putting the lid on a boiling pot," Holitzer says. Full-fledged street battles broke out between police with clubs and water cannon and stone-throwing rioters trying to reach the trains; dozens were injured.

Long-planned 40th-anniversary celebrations in East Berlin occurred just four days later, on a Saturday. A counter-rally swelled to thousands, who marched spontaneously through the middle of the city during the official parade. As

they entered a residential area a mile or so north, police and the Stasi swept in, beating and arresting hundreds of people. In Plauen, a bleak industrial town near the Czech border, police used water cannon to break up a crowd of 10,000 gathered peacefully in the main square.

In the space of five autumn days, the GDR's leaders had shown what they were capable of. After the events of that chaotic week, the St. Nicholas Church Monday peace protests were on a collision course with an increasingly desperate regime.





“[Monday] was the decisive day,” Führer says. “Either the ‘Chinese solution’ or—we didn’t know what ‘or’ might be.”

Hollitzer, the Stasi museum director in Leipzig, says the archival evidence is damning. In the first week of October, nearly 3,500 East Germans were arrested as the police tried to jail anyone they thought capable of organizing protests. Hospitals in Leipzig were told to prepare extra beds, detention centers were set up on the outskirts of the city to handle

arrestees, and 8,000 police were brought in, enough to handle roughly 20,000 protesters. A few days before, the cofounders of the Monday rallies, Führer and Wonneberger, had been arrested and warned by a livid Stasi officer to call everything off, then quickly released. “It’s clear what was supposed to happen on October 9,” Hollitzer says. “They were going to clean up.”

At 3 PM on Monday, Schwabe made his way to the church through an eerily empty city. “It was like the calm before a storm,” he says. At five, nearly 8,000

people crammed into St. Nicholas. Three other downtown churches opened their doors to accommodate the overflow.

“When I came out, the square in front of the church was full,” Schwabe recalls. Police had blocked the road

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that led to the city’s historic marketplace, so the crowd flowed in the other direction. “The next stop was the Augustusplatz”—downtown Leipzig’s largest open space, sandwiched between the philharmonic and the opera house—“and it was full too, just black with people.”

In the end, nearly 70,000 Leipzigers, a sixth of the city, poured into the streets in peaceful protest that night. Chanting “*Keine Gewalt*” (No violence) and what would become the iconic slogan of the opposition movement, “*Wir sind das Volk*” (We are the people), the crowd carried their candles onto the ring road around the city center, marching past the Stasi headquarters and the hundreds of police gathered in front of the train station. “It was a great sign of hope. To hold a candle, you need both hands—one to hold the candle, and the other to keep it from being blown out,” Führer says. “You can’t hold a rock in your other hand.”

The entire city was swept up. Trams ground to a halt, and drivers left their cars in the middle of the road to join the march. After frantic requests for instructions from East Berlin went unanswered, the police packed up and left. “They were ready for everything except candles and prayers,” Führer says. “That night, the GDR was a different place than it had been that morning.”

A 10-minute tape of the march, filmed in secret by a TV crew hidden in a church steeple, was smuggled back to East Berlin and across the wall, then broadcast on West German television. (Not until after the Stasi archives were opened did more pictures of the protests—from the secret police perspective—come to light.) The sheer number of people who peacefully took to Leipzig’s

streets had disarmed the East German regime. “The decisive day was in Leipzig,” Eppelmann says. “They were all ready to crack down on 30,000, but 30,000 didn’t show up, 70,000 did. Seventy thousand people who didn’t know if they’d come home intact or see their families again. It was a heroic and enormous act of moral courage.”

In the weeks that followed, there was chaos behind the scenes in East Berlin as the party tried desperately to save itself. Many of the SED’s hard-liners were pushed out of their

leadership positions in the hopes that a compromise with the opposition might be made. But the dam had broken. On October 16, a procession of 150,000 people marched around Leipzig’s ring road; the week after it was 300,000, the crowds of Leipzigers joined by people from all over East Germany. On November 4, more than 500,000 people flooded Alexanderplatz in East Berlin.

After the drama of the Monday Demonstrations, the fall of the wall was an anticlimax. On November 9, the day after a party congress designed to get the SED back on its feet and reclaim control, a routine press conference was called to announce the party’s latest decisions. As the conference drew to a close, an Italian journalist asked Politburo member Günter Schabowski if there would be any changes to the repressive East German travel restrictions. Flummoxed, Schabowski said that as far as he knew all restrictions were being lifted immediately. His casual announcement on live television sent thousands to Berlin’s border crossings on the night of November 9, where confused, overwhelmed guards stood back and let people through.

After the heady days of opposition, the sudden collapse came as a shock. Even then, reunification was unimaginable. For the dissidents who had been filled with hope at the sight of East Germans rallying to their cause, the fall of the wall was initially seen as a huge setback. “We were disappointed,” Schwabe admits. “We thought everyone who would help us change the country would leave, and there would be no reason to come out

on the street.” A friend of Eppelmann’s made it a few hundred yards across the border that night before panicking and running back to East Berlin, afraid the entire scene had been a Stasi trick to get rid of troublemakers so the door could be closed firmly behind them.

Of course, we know now that November 9 was merely the end of the end. Within a year, the two Germanies—divided for almost half a century—were united again, and communism was a relic. But because of the way we remember the fall of the wall, we’ve assumed ever since that the sudden end of an unpopular regime—in Serbia, in Iraq, in Ukraine, in Georgia—is enough to replicate the successes of 1989, and that the institutions and attitudes that form the basis for civil society can be created overnight. For the same reason, opposition movements that don’t succeed immediately tend not to garner much lasting interest.

But talk to the people who risked everything to show up at St. Nicholas Monday after Monday, never dreaming of a night when there would be no need, and one thing becomes clear: In the places where it mattered—in Warsaw, in Budapest, in East Berlin—change took time. After the wall came down, Rainer Eppelmann spent 15 years as a member of parliament and now runs the government-funded Foundation for the Study of the SED Dictatorship. Looking back, he says revolutions



**Rainer Eppelmann, shown here in 1990, was a leader of the peace movement that helped to undermine the East German regime, and became the minister for disarmament and defense in a reunified Germany.**

can’t—and shouldn’t—be rushed. “No chancellor, no U.S. president, no British prime minister, could send in troops to Central Europe and liberate the people. It would have meant war,” he says. “What happened was a self-liberation. Soft water breaks the hardest stone.” ■