



09.11.1989

9 November: Opening of the Berlin Wall and thus of the border between the Federal Republic of Germany and the GDR



By 1989, the GDR has become what we would now call a failed state. Economically, the country has not been self-sustainable for years. Furthermore, the GDR is only preserved from state-bankruptcy through subsidies and credits from the Federal Republic of Germany. As a result of the ineffective and impractical principles of a planned economy and completely antiquated technology, economic productivity is far removed from the world-class standard so readily touted in the GDR. Consequently, GDR products are simply not able to compete on the international market. Environmentally, the GDR is precariously close to complete collapse. Open-cut brown coal mines and industry that openly mocks any suggestion of environmental protection have led to some areas of the country becoming barely inhabitable wastelands. Heating, fired by brown coal furnaces, and exhaust fumes from the two-stroke engines of the small local cars, endearingly referred to as “Trabbis”, cause a stench that is frequently difficult to tolerate in cities. Respiratory illnesses are one of the biggest killers in the GDR. As a result of state neglect, city-centres resemble landscapes of ruins, while the general population lives in prefabricated housing estates on the edge of towns. There are constant shortages in all basic necessities: clothing, food, technical equipment, just to name a few. “Schlange stehen” (“standing in line”) is an everyday reality for even the smallest, simplest purchases. In addition to coping with all these adversities, there is the constant political oppression and widespread spying, which further alienates citizens from the state. It is only the fiercely guarded German-German border that prevents the flight of many people from their country, which comes to feel like a worn-out and run-down jail to them.



A peace and environmental movement also emerges in the GDR, primarily underpinned by the church. Under the slogan “Schwerter zu Pflugscharen” (“swords to ploughshares”), courageous GDR citizens take up the fight against nuclear armament in the East and West. Protests break out at the sites of the worst environmental polluters, in front of heavy industry and chemical industry facilities and at brown coal open-cut mines. Nevertheless, unlike in West Germany, such concerns are not allowed to be freely expressed in the GDR. Consequently, a fundamental anti-state oppositional movement grows up from the resistance to the core problems in the GDR. The most significant point of conflict for opposition groups in the GDR is, however, the SED Regime’s systematic disregard for civil rights. At the same time, it is important to note that civil rights campaigners in the GDR are not fighting for the abolition of the GDR,



but for improvements to the state. To many East German citizens, the Federal Republic of Germany, with its market-economy oriented state is by no means considered a better alternative.



In January 1989, around 500 people form a protest for freedom of opinion in the city of Leipzig. The state responds with customary repression, but it soon loses control. When Hungary dismantles its border fortifications in May 1989, taking the policy of détente of Mikhail Gorbachev, the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) more seriously than the government in East Berlin, the GDR quickly comes under heightened pressure. Many GDR citizens seize this opportunity to try to reach the West via Hungary. At the same time, many try to escape via the West German embassies in Prague, Warsaw and Budapest, where they request exit documents. In addition, extensive electoral fraud is publicly confirmed following the local elections held in May 1989. Steadily fewer people are prepared to allow themselves to be lied to and spied on by a state that is not even in a realistic position to satisfy its citizens' most basic existential needs. In June of the same year, Gorbachev announces that the Soviet Union would not stand by or come to the aid of the SED in the case of riots or conflict in the GDR as happened in 1953. For many GDR citizens, this represents a further encouraging sign that they can, in fact, take to the streets to protest against the abuses. From the month of September, the so-called "Montagsdemonstrationen" ("Monday demonstrations") take place in Leipzig, setting out from St Nicholas Church, in which participants peacefully advocate for a better GDR. Participant numbers in the Monday demonstrations increase from week to week. Very soon, numerous people follow the Leipzig example in other cities. Across the entire country, civil rights forums are now established, such as the New Forum, aiming to give the protests structure and organisation. Although the SED regime tries to stop its fall from power in the customary manner, with violence, "corruption" and arrests, fewer and fewer people are intimidated or daunted in their actions. On 30 September, when the West German Foreign Minister, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, makes his announcement from the balcony of the German embassy in Prague to what has, in the meantime, become thousands of GDR citizens gathered within the embassy grounds, that - following negotiations with the government in East Berlin - they will be allowed to travel to the West, he has effectively declared the downfall of the GDR. Now there is no stopping the people, even though the risk of an escalation in violence from the increasingly desperate regime is also steadily mounting. In Leipzig, the Monday demonstration on 2 October is forcibly dispersed; on 4 October, serious riots break out in front of the main station in Dresden. Many GDR citizens consider the celebrations to mark the 40th anniversary of the founding of the GDR, which take place on 7 October in East Berlin, to be an unrealistic mockery of their genuine concerns and problems. Even Gorbachev uses this occasion to urge Erich Honecker, who has been the head of government in the GDR since 1971, to implement reforms - albeit in vain. The erratic old men surrounding Honecker do not see reforms as the solution, but consider violence to be the logical resolution. The number of participants in the Monday demonstrations are increasing significantly every week. On 16 October, some 120,000 people demonstrate in Leipzig freely and courageously. They chant, "Wir sind das Volk!" ("We are the

..... people!”) Honecker orders the violent suppression of the demonstrations, but the local SED-headquarters defies the order and, thus, prevents a veritable bloodbath. On 18 October, Honecker is forced to resign from the Politburo. However, his successor, Egon Krenz, is no longer able to halt the course of events. On 4 November, 1,000,000 people stage a demonstration for freedom of opinion and democracy at the Alexanderplatz, a large public square and central hub in East Berlin – at the very latest, the “old” GDR ceases to exist from this point in time.

The fact that the actual opening of the Wall ultimately occurred as the result of a grotesque misunderstanding fits the image imparted by the GDR leadership in the last months of their existence. Günter Schabowski, a member of the SED Politburo and, at the end of the GDR, one of the very few from the old leadership team to find the courage to confront his own role in the oppressive regime, makes a historic announcement at a press conference. The intention was for him to announce generously relaxed conditions for GDR citizens to travel into western countries. When he is asked from when these conditions would apply, he mistakenly replies, “Nach meiner Kenntnis ist das sofort, unverzüglich.” (“As far as I know – effective immediately, without delay.”) With this now causing an immediate run on the border posts in Berlin and along the inner-German border, Schabowski has brought about the fall of the Wall. The GDR leadership’s actual plans anticipate strict controls and a secret immediate expulsion of all citizens who want to have their passport stamped on departure. To win time, the process was, however, supposed to begin on the following day. In this way, people who might actually have only wanted to use the new regulation for a short visit to the West would have unwittingly allowed themselves to be deported. Unintentionally, Schabowski prevented this plan from succeeding in the chaos resulting from his mistaken statement. Instead of waiting 24 hours, huge masses of people are allowed to pass unimpeded through the border posts into the West to avoid any further escalation of the situation. In stark contrast to the past, November 9 now becomes a day of joy for all Germans. Pictures of the fall of the Wall are seen all around the world and everywhere, they are followed with sympathy. The term “Wende” (“The Change” or “The Turn”), which was once used by the penultimate Chairman of the State Council of the GDR as a desperate promise of changes, now becomes independent from its creator, turns against him and becomes a synonym for a successful peaceful revolution.

Translated from German to English by Heather Rae, proofread by Maria-Philippa Wieckowski



Prof. Dr. Tobias Arand



References:

Henke, Klaus-Dietmar (Hrsg.): Revolution und Vereinigung 1989/90. Als in Deutschland die Realität die Phantasie überholte. München 2009.
Kowalczyk, Ilko-Sascha: Endspiel. Die Revolution von 1989 in der DDR. München 2009
Schuller, Wolfgang: Die deutsche Revolution 1989. Berlin 2009