

The collapse of the GDR and the fall of the Berlin Wall

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The collapse of the GDR and the fall of the Berlin Wall

Although possible reunification still seemed far off, the unexpected collapse of the Communist regime in East Germany dramatically changed the parameters of the problem and paved the way for swift reunification to the benefit of West Germany.

Whilst Gorbachev was liberalising the Soviet regime and the movements opposed to Communism were gathering strength in Central and Eastern Europe, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) appeared to be an invincible fortress, solidly constructed by the Communist Party, which was supported by the army and the secret police, the leaders of which were set against any change and counted on the support of the Soviet troops stationed in the GDR.

Nevertheless, there was a growing wave of opposition, supported by the Protestant churches which, in the autumn of 1988, called for a 'society with a human face', and subsequently in 1989 for a liberalisation of the regime. Large numbers of opponents gathered for 'Monday prayers', protesting against the police state and calling for democracy. Reform groups advocated 'Socialism with a human face', a third way between the Stalinist Socialism of the GDR and the liberal capitalism of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). This, they claimed, would ensure the survival of East Germany rather than its absorption into West Germany. However, the reformers soon found themselves overtaken by events. A series of vast demonstrations took place, calling for freedom of thought, freedom of the press and freedom of assembly. The people of East Germany wanted more than simply a reform of the GDR and Socialism; they wanted a share of the prosperity enjoyed by West Germany, which had seen a massive influx of refugees from East Germany. They demonstrated in favour of a united Germany.

The East German Government, led by Erich Honecker, was counting on Soviet support to save the regime. But Gorbachev, wary of compromising his policy of rapprochement with the West, refused any sort of military intervention, and confirmed the fact to Helmut Kohl when he visited Bonn on 13 June 1989. Gorbachev tried to persuade the East German leaders to proceed with reforms, along the lines of perestroika. On 18 October, Honecker, who refused to yield, was stripped of his post and replaced as leader of the Communist Party by Egon Krenz, with Moscow's approval. Hans Modrow, who was in favour of the reforms, became Head of Government. But it was too late. On 4 November, the new leaders were booed by a crowd of a million people gathered on Alexanderplatz in East Berlin. On 9 November, this led to the decision to authorise travel abroad. Immediately, thousands of people wanted to cross through the frontier posts in Berlin, which were forced to open up to the crowd. The demonstrators started to demolish the 'Wall of Shame'. Several million East Germans visited West Berlin, the 'shop window of the West'.

The following day, 10 November, the leaders of the GDR promised that 'free and secret elections' would take place in May 1990. However, continuing demonstrations forced them to bring the elections forward to 18 March. The Socialist reformers were defeated and the Christian Democrat Lothar de Maizière became Head of Government of the GDR. On 12 April, he declared himself in favour of a unified Germany within NATO and the European Community.