

1989 Leipzig Protests

Group 5:

Alison Fister

Liu Jingpeng

Kyle Ormsby

Randall Kyle Pearson

March 13, 2009

1989 Leipzig Protests

Introduction:

Often referred to as the “Peaceful Revolution” the 1989 Leipzig protests are considered the driving force behind the resignation of leaders of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Brief History:

East Germany, the GDR, was founded in 1949. The first constitution gave the citizens certain basic rights; however, there was very little freedom in reality. The GDR was organized in the image of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and then became a model for all other Soviet satellites (Gordeeva). East Germany was used as a buffer zone between the USSR and the West. In 1961, the Berlin Wall was built to separate East and West Germany. The Wall became the most powerful visual symbol of the Cold War (Olsen).

The GDR became one of the most repressive regimes in the Eastern Bloc and gained international recognition in December 1972. Once the GDR gained recognition, official contact was established with West Germany and East Germans gained a new understanding of the West. Citizens began to resent the repression of their



regime. When the East German leader, Erich Honecker, discovered feelings of dissent, he created a harsh policy toward dissidents. Many artists and writers who advocated reforms and democratization were targeted. These people were either imprisoned or deported to West

Germany in a wave of persecution. Many dissident groups advocated for reunification (Gordeeva).

By the summer of 1989, Hungary had opened up its border, and around 30,000 East Germans fled across to Austria by December of that year. Since East Germans who entered West Germany gained immediate citizenship, many fled to the West German embassies across Eastern Europe to demand passports. Once the citizens had their passports a problem arose with getting exit visas from the Communist government. To solve this problem, a deal was made with Honecker and the people had to travel in sealed trains to the free West (Olsen).

Those who left the East had a number of different reasons. One man, Henry Albrecht, did well in school and got into a good university to study law. Unfortunately, while Henry was a disc jockey for a school club, he played a song suggesting the Berlin Wall be taken down, which got him immediately expelled. In the GDR, once expelled, one could not return to the university system. Years later, desperate, Henry left his wife and child behind and fled for the West. The many others who fled saw the opening of the Hungarian borders as their one chance of a lifetime. One man said:

All summer long. It is the number one topic of conversation in East Germany. We left now because after the 40th anniversary on October 7, the Government will shut the country up tight. Only the party elite will be able to go on vacation outside East Germany. So we got in the car and drove straight to Prague. There was no time to waste. If you can't get out now, you had better be prepared to spend the rest of your life locked in there, because they are not going to change. Reforms are not about to happen (Protzman).

Little did that man know that change was coming quite rapidly for East Germany in 1989.

In Leipzig, a large East German city, prayers for peace occurred regularly in the Nikolaikirche, or the Nikolai Church. Beginning in the early 1980s, the youth of the church gathered together every November for ten days to pray. Eventually, the peace prayers took place

every Monday after evening services. These meetings were the only opportunity for discussing broader issues. Later, the services were conducted by those who had opted out of military service for community work. The Monday prayers quickly turned political and many non-Christians attended (Führer).

The Protests:

The October 1989 protests in Leipzig, the second largest city in East Germany, put enormous pressure on the GDR and forced the resignation of leaders, the government, and subsequently the fall of the Wall on November 9th. Prayer gatherings for peace had been taking place at the Nikolai Church every Monday since 1982. Word slowly spread, and by 1989 the prayer sessions began to assume a large scale. Authorities recognized this, and on May 6th they attempted to cut off the church by barricading the streets, hoping to keep people away. This effort had an adverse effect as it caused the congregations to continually increase. The gatherings had initially begun with a few hundred at the Nikolai Church shortly after the 40th anniversary of the GDR. The Leipzig protests are often known as the “peaceful revolution” because the protests never became violent, which made it even harder for GDR officials to do anything about them. The protestors’ intent was not to overthrow the government but to reform it. On October 7th 1989 arrests were made in the crowds outside the Nikolai Church. Police used brute force against the protesters and were preparing for a large demonstration that would take place on October 9th. An article in the Leipzig newspaper reported that the demonstration would be put down “with whatever means necessary” (Deutsche Welle). Preparations were even made in hospitals for an influx of patients, specifically ones with gunshot wounds.

On October 9th 1989 the famous demonstration took place. There were reports of



about 6,000 to 8,000 people crammed into the Nikolai Church in the middle of the city, with another some 70,000 outside. People from all over the GDR came to Leipzig to demonstrate and show their distaste for how the government was being run. Police and officials did not know what to expect but prepared for the worse, thinking it would become violent. But instead of rocks each protester was armed with a candle in hand, symbolizing non-violence, and along with the candles chants and prayers were heard. The most famous one was “we are the people,” which was a reminder to GDR leaders that a democratic republic was to be ruled by the people, not by an undemocratic party claiming to represent them. In later reports a member of the SED Central Committee was quoted as saying “We had everything planned. We were ready for anything – except candles and prayers” (Deutsche Welle). Had rocks been thrown things would have quickly turned bloody. Instead, the tanks that had been readied were forced to withdraw without firing a single shot; this would change the GDR forever.

In the weeks following, protests were inspired by the one on October 9th, each gaining in size and placing more pressure on the GDR. On October 16th 120,000 gathered for the Monday demonstration, and the number peaked on the 30th when 300,000 demonstrators marched for reform. The Leipzig protests also had begun to spread to other cities, increasing the pressure on the government for change. Throughout all the protests the idea of peace and no violence held strong. Whenever things seemed to get out of hand with protesters and police, chants of “no violence!” would ring throughout the crowd.

Aftermath:

For the East German regime the end was in sight now after the peaceful revolution that took place on October 9th 1989. Word spread fast about the peaceful protests in Leipzig, and after hearing that the East German police did not use force against the protesters the revolution

spread throughout the country. This day marked the beginning of the end for communism in East Germany and the start of German reunification.

After the success in Leipzig the size of the revolution in East Germany grew rapidly and influenced many more demonstrations throughout the country. The peaceful marches spread to cities such as Potsdam, Jena, Dresden, and East Berlin, where citizens united in the hundreds of thousands with the goal of

obtaining more freedoms and less cruelty from the government. In Leipzig demonstrations were now being held weekly around government buildings with over 300,000 people filling the streets



for hours. With so much pressure coming from within the country many key political figures were forced to resign from their positions in the government. Even the GDR leader, Erich Honecker, resigned and was replaced by Egon Krenz, who turned out to be the last East German government official for the GDR when he resigned in December of 1989. The Prime Minister Willi Stoph could do nothing to stop the revolution as the GDR fell apart.

As the protests continued in greater numbers and as more politicians were being forced into resignation, other problems appeared for the GDR. A severe labor shortage was obvious, as all industry had nearly shut down and foreign workers were being sent back to their home countries. The labor shortage was intensified when Hungary opened its borders allowing for thousands of citizens a day to flee the country. There was not anyone left to work at any of the industrial jobs, and public service was non-existent. As a result, there was no flow of money in

East Germany. It was only a matter of time before the Berlin Wall would fall and the borders would open signifying the collapse of the GDR.

Exactly one month after the first demonstration in Leipzig the Berlin Wall fell, which meant that the political system was about to fail in East Germany. Citizens who previously were not allowed to leave the country were now free to go wherever they wanted. This did not stop the demonstrations, which continued as before in Leipzig until March of 1990, for all of the people who did not leave and still wanted freedom for East Germany. Then on March 19th 1990 free elections were held and a new government was elected. The newly elected governing party began the salvage process, starting with recreating the states that existed before WW II. The final goal was achieved on October 3rd 1990, when East and West Germany unified into what is now present-day Germany.

Historically October 9th 1989 may not be as well known as November 9th 1989, when the Berlin Wall officially fell, but it was the day that the marches began allowing for the Wall to fall. If 70,000 demonstrators had not remained peaceful in Leipzig, everything could have ended up completely different. Although this date is not as



well-known, it was the reason that the crowd became so overwhelmingly large and turned into a large-scale movement for East Germany. The marches in Leipzig started the fight for freedom and the unification of Germany.

Groups and People Involved:

GDR: German Democratic Republic, (German: *Deutsche Demokratische Republik*, DDR; commonly known in English as East Germany) was a self-declared socialist state (but often referred to in the West as a “communist state”) created in the Soviet Zone of occupied Germany and the Soviet sector of occupied Berlin, according to Wikipedia. East Germany existed from 7 October 1949 until 3 October 1990. The celebration of the GDR’s fortieth anniversary helped provoke the Leipzig protests.

FRG: West Germany (German: *Westdeutschland* or *West-Deutschland*) was the common English name of the Federal Republic of Germany (German: *Bundesrepublik Deutschland*), according to Wikipedia, “from its formation in May 1949 to German unification in October 1990, when East Germany was dissolved and its states became part of the Federal Republic, ending the more than 40-year division of Germany.”

SED: The Socialist Unity Party of Germany (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*) was the ruling party of the former German Democratic Republic. “The SED was founded in 1946 as the result of a forced unification of the KPD (*Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands* / Communist Party of Germany) and SPD (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* / Social Democratic Party of Germany) in the Soviet Occupation Zone of Germany. In 1989 after the fall of the *Mauer* [the Berlin Wall] it renamed itself SED-PDS, and since February 1990 there was only PDS,” explained Jarig Bakker in “East Germany.” There were four presidents in the GDR’s history; two of them influenced this event. They were trying to forbid protests. They did not want East Germans to go to West Germany because they did not support the unification of Germany.

FDJ: The Free German Youth, also known as the FDJ (German: *Freie Deutsche Jugend*), was the official socialist youth movement of the GDR and the Socialist Unity Party of Germany. According to “Free German Youth, Member of World Federation of Democratic Youth (WFDY) since 1948,” “The organization was meant for young people, both male and female, between



the ages of 14 and 25 and comprised about 75% of the young population of former East Germany. After being a member of the Thälmann Pioneers, which was for schoolchildren ages 6 to 14, East German youths would usually join the FDJ.” The FDJ was intended to be a “reliable assistant and fighting reserve of the Worker’s Party.” They tried to educate GDR youth. The political and ideological goal of the FDJ was to influence every aspect of life of young people in the GDR. On the other hand, “After the GDR was annexed by the FRG in 1990 the GDR organizations were nearly totally smashed. But the FDJ did not break up. The number of members went down rapidly till 1992 but has been relatively small and solid since then,” as stated in “Free German Youth.” Members did not just follow Honecker’s policies, they supported the GDR, and they wanted the GDR and FRG to communicate better.

Erich Honecker (August 25, 1912—May 29, 1994): Honecker was a German Communist politician who led the German Democratic Republic from 1971 until 1989. He was the second president of the SED; he was also the person who supported the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961. It was significant that people protested for the right to travel to West Germany during his political tenure. According to Wikipedia, Honecker was extradited to Germany by the new Russian government after he had fled to the Soviet Union. In Germany he was imprisoned and tried for high treason. Honecker had refused to implement reforms in the GDR, reportedly saying to the Russian leader, Gorbachev, “We have done our perestroika, we have nothing to restructure.” During the GDR protests, the elderly and ill Honecker was forced to resign on October 18th 1989, after 18 years in power, and was replaced by Egon Krenz. The official reason for his departure was said to be “ill health” but failure to deal with the tide of discontentment sweeping the country and the party was thought to be the real reason.



Egon Krenz: Krenz is a German former Communist, who briefly served as leader of the German Democratic Republic in 1989 before the end of Communist rule. Throughout his career, Krenz held a number of prominent positions in the Communist regime, but he is most



remembered as the leader of the GDR during the fall of the Berlin Wall. After reunification he was sentenced to six-and-a-half years in prison. Krenz, a longtime member of the Politburo and FDJ chairman, became Honecker's successor as general secretary of the SED. Krenz also assumed the chairmanship of the Council of State. He did not remain president for long and resigned in April 1990.

Protesters: Protesters played the most important role; just because of their actions, everything changed. On 7 October 1989, as East Germany celebrated the 40th anniversary of its founding, people in different cities in the GDR started extended protests. In Berlin, near the celebration square, there were over 7000 citizens who got together and demonstrated. More than 100 people were arrested. As more and more people joined the protest, the content of the protest also changed. Such a large protest had never happened in East Germany's history. The number of protestors increased to 10,000 several days later on October 16th.

Conclusion:

Though there were many movements in the GDR to bring down the Communist regime, the protests at the Nikolaikirche in Leipzig were some of the most prominent and peaceful. The events of October 9, 1989 will stand out in German history as revolutionary and significant.

Works Cited

"1989: East German Leader Ousted." *BBC*

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/october/18/newsid_2450000/2450783.stm>.

Baidu. 20 Dec. 2008 <<http://zhidao.baidu.com/question/78884716.html>>.

Bakker, Jarig, Jens Pattke, and Volker Moerbitz Keith. "Socialist Unity Party of Germany 1946-1990 (East Germany)." *CRWflags*. 04 Nov. 2006

<<http://www.crwflags.com/fotw/flags/de%7Dsed.html>>.

Davie, Trish. "Leipzig, 9 October 1989: When the Church Led a Peaceful Revolution." *All Hallows Church*. 2002

<<http://www.allhallowsleeds.org.uk/worship/sermons/TrishDavie021013.shtml>>.

Elvers-Guyot, Julia. "Peace Prayers Helped Bring Down the Wall, Says Leipzig Pastor."

Deutsche Welle. 5 Jan. 2009 <<http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,3805080,00.html>>.

"The Fall of the Wall." *Chronik der Wende* <http://www.chronik-der-wende.de/_/english/index_jsp.html>.

Free German Youth <<http://www.fdj.de/HISTORY.html>>.

Führer, C., Reverend. "The Events in Fall 1989." Nikolaikirche Leipzig

<http://www.nikolaikirche-leipzig.de/index2.php?option=com_content&do_pdf=1&id=64>.

Gordeeva, Tatyana. "The Peace Movement and Internal Resistance in GDR." *German Culture*.

25 Sept. 2001

<http://www.germanculture.com.ua/library/history/bl_peace_movement.htm>.

Hertle, Hans-Hermann. "October 1989." *Chronik der Mauer* <[http://www.chronik-der-](http://www.chronik-der-mauer.de/index.php/de/Start/Index/id/652005)

[mauer.de/index.php/de/Start/Index/id/652005](http://www.chronik-der-mauer.de/index.php/de/Start/Index/id/652005)>.

"History of Germany since 1945." *Wikipedia*

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Germany_since_1945>.

"Monday Demonstrations in East Germany." *Wikipedia*. 28 Aug. 2008

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monday_demonstrations_in_East_Germany>.

Olsen, Jon Berndt. "East Germany." *Making the History of 1989* <[http://www.dw-](http://www.dw-world.de/dw/0,,12302,00.html)

[world.de/dw/0,,12302,00.html](http://www.dw-world.de/dw/0,,12302,00.html) >.

"The Peace Movement and Internal Resistance in GDR." *German Culture*

<http://www.germanculture.com.ua/library/history/bl_peace_movement.htm>.

"The Peaceful Revolution of 1989." *Inyourpocket*

<<http://www.inyourpocket.com/germany/leipzig//feature/56082->

[the_peaceful_revolution_of_1989.html?more=1](http://www.inyourpocket.com/germany/leipzig//feature/56082-the_peaceful_revolution_of_1989.html?more=1)>.

Protzman, Ferdinand. "Tales Emigres Tell: Why Life in East Germany Proved Finally

Intolerable." *The New York Times*. 9 Oct. 1989

<<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=950DE5DA1F31F93AA35753C1A96F>

[948260](http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=950DE5DA1F31F93AA35753C1A96F948260)>.

"Revolution in 1989." *Virtual Tourist*. 30 Sept. 2001

<<http://members.virtualtourist.com/m/tt/14abe/>>.

Schmemmann, Serge. "100,000 Protest in Leipzig In Largest Rally in Decades." *The New York Times* 17 Oct. 1989

<<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=950DE4D71530F934A25753C1A96F948260&sec=&spon=&pagewanted=1>>.

Photo Credits

Pg 2 - <http://einestages.spiegel.de/hund->

images/2008/09/30/60/491f231364c83dda856ccaa668603cb5_image_document_large_featured_borderless.jpg

Pg 5 - http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/3/3b/Montagsdemonstration_in_Leipzig.jpg

Pg 6 - <http://members.virtualtourist.com/m/p/m/512e6/>

Pg 7 - http://www.chronik-der-wende.de/_tag_foto_jsp/key=tag7.10.1989.html

Pg 9 - <http://www.kampelmann.net/Ulli%20in%20class%20-%20FDJ.jpg>

Pg 9 - <http://www.chronik-der-mauer.de/index.php/de/Common/Image/field/original/id/23385/width/400>

Pg 10 - http://news.bbc.co.uk/media/images/38543000/jpg/_38543671_egonkrenz238.jpg