

Revolution and the Fall of the Berlin Wall

Berlin, Germany 1986-1991

Topic #17

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Like a moth drawn to the candlelight, people young and old within East and West Berlin, Germany were drawn to the Berlin Wall on a bitter winter's night, November 9, 1989. Despite the East German people and its youth's desire for socio-economic and political change under the Soviet communist leadership, the gathering at the Wall had been unexpected that night but had prompted those who had watched the East German press conference on television to come out to the Wall. <sup>1</sup> There were three contributing factors behind the historic event in 1989: First the poor Eastern Berlin economy, second, the restructuring of the Soviet socio-political system by Mikal Gorbachev and thirdly, the East Germans press conference and world mass press media. This essay will examine these factors that contributed to the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989 according to Pulitzer Prize winner for the 1989 Berlin wall coverage, author, Serge Schmemann in his book, *When the Wall Came Down*.

As explained by Schmemann, by late 1989, there was a youth revolution sprouting around the world, with mass student protests at Tinsman Square in Beijing, China, <sup>2</sup> mass youth protests in East Germany and in Eastern Europe, in countries such as Czechoslovakia <sup>3</sup> and Romania, <sup>4</sup> fueled by the determination of young people in search of a better way of life, for example. Young people around the world, especially those in East Berlin, Germany and Eastern Europe were slowly waking up to the reality of political, socio-economic oppression and longed to live free lives, Schmemann wrote. The social changes also reflected the revolutionary change worldwide through music, art, mass protests and student union action.

In a sense, the youth of the 1989 generation from East Berlin had lost their innocence and had nothing left to lose so they took part in mass demonstrations against the communist alites in government. They stood together against the communist leadership that controlled every corner of their entire lives and wanted to bring about socio economic and political change. They were eyewitness to the suffering of their parents and grandparents before them and did not want to continue the inter-generational trauma of fear, depression, poverty, food insecurity, chronic unemployment and limited education for example. <sup>5</sup> Furthermore, inevitable change took place in the West as the world moved rapidly toward technology and the widespread use of computers, in particular in government, in banking, in business and in the home became common.

Youth imaginations awakened and strengthened their resilience, determination and vision they held for a better future. A future however, the young people East Berlin realized, had to be fought for in order to bring about change within their life time, according to Schmemann.<sup>6</sup> Further, by 1989, technology-based mass media, in particular broadcast communications, was available almost immediately and cable and public television channels were available in most households in the west and breaking news such as the fall of the Berlin wall, appeared on their television screens in real time. In Canada, for example, the mainstream media in Canada, the Canadian Broadcasting Cooperation broadcast breaking news and reported the events at the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989 and news anchor, Peter Mansbridge, described the unfolding events and explained that "East Germany's borders have been opened wide — all of them"<sup>7</sup> and foreign correspondent, Claude Adams, described the young people who had rushed to the wall and their response to the news of finally being free to leave East Berlin and explained that ". . .others celebrated the closing of an era. Many of these people. Many of these people were born in the shadow of the wall and soon in a matter of hours it would no longer be a barrier. The opening came much sooner than expected...".<sup>8</sup> The CBC news camera panned across the top of the West wall, where people, mostly young, stood, danced, whistled, cheered, sung, hugged and jumped down to the ground on the west side.

Up until 1989, the people of East Berlin were in a sense, held against their will for decades, since travel to the west was restricted and many people escaped and risked being shot dead by East Berlin communist guards at the wall and fled to the West according to Professor Emeritus, Dr. Peter Wende in *A History of Germany*, Germany's history of its unconditional surrender continued to haunt the people of East Berlin as did the Yalta Agreement on February 9, 1945 that discussed the restructuring of Germany wrote Wende, near the end of World War two in 1945, to divide Germany between the allied forces eventually with the United States, Britain and France in the west and the USSR under Joseph Stalin in the east.<sup>9</sup> Once the division agreement was decided the line between West and East Germany was drawn through the city of Berlin which kept the East Berlin citizens sheltered from the western democratic ideology, capitalist economic system, education system, and from its culture and the rapid technological changes around the world. The Soviet Union along with East Berlin stood frozen in time socio economically and as the world moved toward a greater dependence upon technology<sup>10</sup>, East

Berlin, along with the Soviets had fallen behind the emerging technological developments. The East German young people were aware of the current and political events as well as the lifestyle in West Germany and realized that they were in a distressing place, according to Schmemmann.<sup>11</sup> However, by the night's end on November 9, 1989, the people of East Berlin went from feeling the depths of despair of confinement to feeling the excitement of freedom and danced in the streets and drank champagne. Young East Berlin people shouted, "the wall is gone, the wall is gone"<sup>12</sup> and some eagerly jumped down to the West Berlin side. People on the West Berlin side also came out of their homes to join in the celebration and family, extended family and friends were reunited and by the next morning, the world was aware that the symbol of the cold war was finally gone wrote Schmemmann.<sup>13</sup>

The first contributing factor in the fall of the Berlin Wall was the weak East Berlin and Eastern European economy that dated back to Potsdam conference and Germany's unconditional surrender at the end of World War Two in 1945 which served as the foundation of the separation of Germany, eventually becoming West Germany and East Germany, with the division by the form of a Wall within the city of Berlin, Germany.<sup>14</sup> In contrast, West Berlin had a flourishing economy and had new vehicles such as new BMW's as well as a University, Zoo and parks, were free to travel and within twenty years since World War Two's end, West Berlin was doing well and had recovered from the cold war while East Berliners were forced to leave East Germany due to socio economic hardship wrote Wende.<sup>15</sup>

However, Author Abraham Brumberg, in his book, *Chronicles of a Revolution* included a paper by Political Scientist, Gavrill Popov, titled Perestroika and the Primary of Politic, in which he reflected upon this issue of a poor East Berlin due to the failing economy in the Soviet Union which needed to be changed and explained, "The very fate of Perestroika, it seemed, hung on the ability to overhaul our economic system".<sup>16</sup> From the start of separation between West and East Germany, the Soviets took over banks, industry, education and made land reforms in their quest to create a socialist society in East Berlin, Schmemmann wrote.

The political and economic structure was based upon the Soviet communist system and soviets initially took over all the high rank positions, shifting East Germany towards a communist system.<sup>17</sup> However, by 1989, realized that there needed to be ongoing change, not only in the Soviet's political system but within the East Germany political system as well and

scheduled elections for the upcoming spring, March 18, 1990 Wende further wrote <sup>18</sup>. As each new year came and went, and the world changed and moved forward, East Berlin remained the same, with a lack of employment, lack of training, lack of opportunity for a university education and a lack of technology. Yet the youth, who were deprived of the opportunities a changing world offered, did not give up hope in finding a better path in their lives and in a matter of time that the Berlin Wall would fall, Wende wrote. <sup>19</sup>

Next, the second contributing factor in the fall of the Berlin wall, was the crumbling Soviet Union economy which began between 1988-1991 and later became the Soviet Union. "One of Stalin's blind spots-among so many others-was his failure to understand the way in which capitalism is tied to democracy." <sup>20</sup> explained Popov, an academic writer in Brumberg's book *Chronicles of Revolution*. In 1985 Mikhail Gorbachev took charge of the Soviet Union and quickly realized that the country was falling behind in its economy, business, education and technology sectors and saw the urgent need to change its socio-political ideological system.<sup>21</sup>The world was changing fast and old leaders with old political ideologies died off and Gorbachev found himself between a rock and hard place and saw that there was no choice but to take charge and push the government into improving its economy and technological development and in order to accomplish these goals, the entire communist ideology had to change and the country would have no choice but to adapt to a free market economy in order to compete with the west and the rest of the world, Popov wrote. <sup>22</sup>

Gorbachev came up the word, "Perestroika" <sup>23</sup> to describe the process of this massive change, especially toward technology and a move away from the old ways of thinking. The citizens were encouraged to speak out and more individual freedoms were allowed and Gorbachev's vision was to modernize the economy and to end to end the cold war, to end the governmental corruption, and to end an epidemic wave of alcoholism across the country. This was the starting point of the revolution, when citizens began advocating for their individual rights and freedoms and mass protests across USSR, Eastern Europe and within East Berlin, spread like wild fire, wrote Schmemmann. <sup>24</sup>

People in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland and in East Berlin began moving around and many fled into West Germany and Hungary opened its borders to allow the movement of the

masses of people who wanted to leave Eastern Europe or who wanted to leave East Berlin; The trains were overflowing with East Germans wanting to get to the West to German Embassies. Mass demonstrations began in Eastern Europe and in East Berlin, there were mass youth demonstrations leading up to the night the wall fell. Gorbachev went to East Berlin and the people loved him and Gorbachev saw the mass ongoing demonstrations where young people burned copies of the constitution and wanted to avoid bloodshed. <sup>25</sup> By November 4, 1989 the communist leaders in East Berlin could no longer control the large crowds and the people realized that they no longer held power over them, Schmemmann wrote. <sup>26</sup> In his research, Wende wrote that, ". . . for the first time in history, Germans had successfully completed their revolution. And it was equally remarkable that this was a 'Velvet Revolution' — a revolution without blood being shed". <sup>27</sup> It was only a matter of days before the wall fell and the division between West and East Germany ended but occurred accidentally on November 9, 1989 during an East German communist press conference held and new travel requirements for East Berlin residents was announced, Schmemmann further wrote. It was the beginning of the end for the German Democratic Republic wrote British Historian, Frederick Taylor, in his book *The Berlin Wall A World Divided 1962-1989*. <sup>28</sup>

Finally, the third contributing factor that led to the fall of the Berlin wall, was the press conference held in communist East Berlin and the role mass press media played in providing information to the East and West Berlin viewers on the evening of November 9, 1989 and to the world within the following days. On that evening the communist leadership, according to Schmemmann, in East Berlin, Germany held a news conference to announce changes to East Berlin residents' travel visa requirements to allow for easier travel between East and West Berlin. At this time in 1989, East Berlin residents had been confined by the wall for over forty years under the communist USSR. However, Professor of Communication Studies, Julia Sonnovend, in her book, *Stories Without Borders The Berlin Wall and the Making of a Global Icon Event*, wrote that subsequent to the press conference, the people, especially the youth, came out of the comfort of their homes into the dark night to take part in the unfolding iconic event <sup>29</sup> The mass press media and mis communication at the "infamous" <sup>30</sup> press conference began the domino effect of leading the German people out into the night to the Berlin Wall,

After the press conference aired, thousands of East Berlin people gathered at the Berlin wall, some demanding to cross into West Berlin and others began to climb the wall. As the crowds grew dangerously, and the communist wall border guards did not know what to do and had not received an order of what to do about the situation and did they understand what was going on in the mass press media and finally, at "11 : 14"<sup>31</sup> pm the supervisor gave the order to open the gates to avoid people being crushed and soon they danced, drank champagne and the fall of the wall began to snowball with the assistance of the mass press media.<sup>32</sup> The following day, news from Berlin spread across the world and the West was overflowing with East Germans<sup>33</sup> The possibility of German reunification became an important issue and discussions between leaders, Gorbachev and Chancellor Helmut Kohl soon began and on October 3, 1990, Germany became one country.<sup>34</sup>

In conclusion, this paper has explained how three contributing factors led to the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, such as the socio-economic political change in the Soviet Union, and the poor East Berlin economy that was complex and occurred over a long period of time.<sup>35</sup> The third contributing factor happened suddenly due the mass press media and its role in the East Berlin press conference which was fueled over a period of time as well, by mass youth led protests and demanded change.<sup>36</sup> These factors discussed in this paper, were supported by a firsthand account Pulitzer Prize winner, historical researchers, Political Scientists and live Canadian mainstream Media, CBC, which were complex processes that occurred due to the everchanging world and emerging computer technology which led to the inevitable downfall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989. The Eastern European landscape had changed drastically and suddenly and new alliances were formed.<sup>37</sup> It was a time of confusion, uncertainty, yet great excitement, anticipation and hope for a better life as the East German people, especially the young, approached the horizon of the new millennium. A future, where the communist led German Democratic Republic would no longer have a place.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup>Schmemann, Serge *When the Wall Came down* (2006) Houghton Mifflin Company Imprint p11
- <sup>2</sup>Schmemann, Serge *When the Wall Came down* (2006) Houghton Mifflin Company Imprint p90
- <sup>3</sup>Schmemann, Serge *When the Wall Came down* (2006) Houghton Mifflin Company Imprint p96
- <sup>4</sup>Schmemann, Serge *When the Wall Came down* (2006) Houghton Mifflin Company Imprint p98
- <sup>5</sup>Schmemann, Serge *When the Wall Came down* (2006) Houghton Mifflin Company Imprint p14
- <sup>6</sup>Schmemann, Serge *When the Wall Came down* (2006) Houghton Mifflin Company Imprint p48
- <sup>7</sup>Canadian Broadcasting Cooperation CBC *Berlin Wall* <https://www.cbc.ca> video
- <sup>8</sup>Canadian Broadcasting Cooperation CBC *Berlin Wall* <https://www.cbc.ca> video
- <sup>9</sup>Wende, Peter *A History of Germany* (2005) Palgrave Macmillan p162
- <sup>10</sup>Brumberg, Abraham *Chronicle of a Revolution* (1990) Random House, Inc, New York p180
- <sup>11</sup>Schmemann, Serge *When the Wall Came down* (2006) Houghton Mifflin Company Imprint p12
- <sup>12</sup>Schmemann, Serge *When the Wall Came down* (2006) Houghton Mifflin Company Imprint p14
- <sup>13</sup>Schmemann, Serge *When the Wall Came down* (2006) Houghton Mifflin Company Imprint p15
- <sup>14</sup>Wende, Peter *A History of Germany* (2005) Palgrave Macmillan p170
- <sup>15</sup>Schmemann, Serge *When the Wall Came down* (2006) Houghton Mifflin Company Imprint p176
- <sup>16</sup>Brumberg, Abraham *Chronicle of a Revolution* (1990) Random House, Inc, New York p181
- <sup>17</sup>Schmemann, Serge *When the Wall Came down* (2006) Houghton Mifflin Company Imprint p33
- <sup>18</sup>Wende, Peter *A History of Germany* (2005) Palgrave Macmillan p179
- <sup>19</sup>Wende, Peter *A History of Germany* (2005) Palgrave Macmillan p179
- <sup>20</sup>Brumberg, Abraham *Chronicle of a Revolution* (1990) Random House, Inc, New York p187
- <sup>21</sup>Timeline Documentary *1922-1991: The Complete History of the Soviet Union* [www.youtube.com/@TimelineChannel](http://www.youtube.com/@TimelineChannel)
- <sup>22</sup>Brumberg, Abraham *Chronicle of a Revolution* (1990) Random House, Inc, New York p181
- <sup>23</sup>Brumberg, Abraham *Chronicle of a Revolution* (1990) Random House, Inc, New York p181
- <sup>24</sup>Schmemann, Serge *When the Wall Came down* (2006) Houghton Mifflin Company Imprint p48
- <sup>25</sup>Schmemann, Serge *When the Wall Came down* (2006) Houghton Mifflin Company Imprint p48

- <sup>26</sup>Schmemann, Serge *When the Wall Came down* (2006) Houghton Mifflin Company Imprint p53
- <sup>27</sup>Wende, Peter *A History of Germany* (2005) Palgrave Macmillan p179
- <sup>28</sup>Taylor, Fredrick, *The Berlin Wall A World Divided 1961-1989* (2006) Harper Collins p425
- <sup>29</sup>Sonnevend, Julia *Stories Without Borders The Berlin Wall and the Making of a Global Icon Event* (2016) Oxford University Press p62
- <sup>30</sup>Sonnevend, Julia *Stories Without Borders The Berlin Wall and the Making of a Global Icon Event* (2016) Oxford University Press p67
- <sup>31</sup>Schmemann, Serge *When the Wall Came down* (2006) Houghton Mifflin Company Imprint p53
- <sup>32</sup>Schmemann, Serge *When the Wall Came down* (2006) Houghton Mifflin Company Imprint p15
- <sup>33</sup>Schmemann, Serge *When the Wall Came down* (2006) Houghton Mifflin Company Imprint p53
- <sup>34</sup>Wende, Peter *A History of Germany* (2005) Palgrave Macmillan PPI 80
- <sup>35</sup>Mccauly, Martin *Gorbachev Profiles in Power* (1998) Pearson Education Limited p66
- <sup>36</sup>Schmemann, Serge *When the Wall Came down* (2006) Houghton Mifflin Company p49
- <sup>37</sup>Schmemann, Serge *When the Wall Came down* (2006) Houghton Mifflin Company Imprint p54

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