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How a 1976 concert shook the Berlin Wall

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East German musician Wolf Biermann took the stage in West Germany in November 1976. His performance unleashed a chain reaction of criticism from both the communist state and its citizens – with historic consequences.



“The barbed wire grows slowly inward / deep into the skin, into the chest and legs / into the brain, into its cells,” sings the man with a mustache wearing a blue-and-white striped shirt, as he accompanies himself on the guitar. “Girded by a wire bandage / our country is an island land / pounded by leaden waves.”

The singer-songwriter’s name is [Wolf Biermann](#), and he was singing about his Germany, the German Democratic Republic (GDR), or East Germany. On November 13, 1976, in the midst of the Cold War, two German nations existed: the Federal Republic of Germany in the West and the GDR in the East.

The performance on this day in the West German city of Cologne’s sporting arena was Biermann’s first official concert during an ongoing stage ban in East Germany that had reached its 11th year. At home, he was not permitted to sing his cheeky, politically critical songs, yet the state leadership did allow him to go on a concert tour in West Germany.

Music to protest a ‘system of politburo politicians’

In his songs, such as the “Ballade vom preußischen Ikarus” (Ballad of the Prussian Icarus) quoted above, Biermann does not mince words, criticizing the East German “politburo system of rule,” which imprisoned its citizens behind walls and barbed wire and shot at East Germans attempting to flee over the border.

Biermann, who considered himself a critical communist, was regarded as an enemy of the state by the East German secret police, the Stasi. He had already been under surveillance and spied upon for years before his Cologne performance.

As that show drew to an end, the West German audience lauded Biermann with standing ovations. “With my guitar in one hand, and a bouquet of red carnations in the other, I let myself be celebrated after four and a half hours of singing in front of 7,000 enchantingly lively people,” he said, reflecting on those moments of happiness

‘It’s all over.’

Three days later, having spent the previous evening celebrating his 40th birthday, Biermann was sitting in a car on his way to the nearby city of Bochum to give a second concert. Suddenly, a report came on the radio: "The GDR's state authorities have revoked the rights of Wolf Biermann, who moved from Hamburg to the GDR in 1953, to further reside in the German Democratic Republic."

Biermann was flabbergasted. "I felt cast aside. I was miserable and overcome with anxiety," he later wrote in his memoir. "That's it! Everything is over! Life is over."

Unlike the many East German citizens who fled to the West, Biermann did not want to leave the GDR at all. On the contrary, he had wanted to help shape it; it was this desire that had prompted him to move there when he was just 16 years. He had wanted to "unabashedly sing and voice his solidary criticism of the GDR," yet that was brought to a stop. Years later, when Biermann was able to view the files the Stasi had compiled on him, he realized that his expatriation apparently had long been planned. The East German leadership had only been waiting for a suitable opportunity.

A wave of protest

Biermann's expatriation triggered a massive wave of protests. A few days later, 12 prominent East German authors, including Christa Wolf, Stephan Hermlin, Sarah Kirsch and Stefan Heym, published an open letter to the East German government: "Wolf Biermann was and is a recalcitrant poet," it stated, among other things. "Our socialist state should be able to bear such an inconvenience calmly and thoughtfully." The letter concluded with an appeal: "We protest against his expatriation and ask that this measure be reconsidered."

After all, the measure was very extreme. Political scientist Jochen Staadt, back then a student at the West German Free University of Berlin, watched the Biermann concert on television. He told DW that he remembers thinking at the time how incredible it was that Biermann was able to perform in Cologne. "But I couldn't even fathom what happened later, since the expatriation of people who spoke out against the regime was something that the Nazis had done. I couldn't imagine that the GDR would sanction on one of its own like this, someone who at the time saw himself as a communist."

A cultural exodus

The first 12 signatories were joined by hundreds more. The East German leadership reacted harshly to the petition, putting artists and intellectuals under pressure, banning them from working, and dismissing artists from the civil service. Some of the signatories later distanced themselves from the petition, but it was too late: A cultural exodus had begun.

In the following months and years, numerous artists and intellectuals left the East Germany, including writers Jurek Becker, Günter Kunert and Reiner Kunze, singers Manfred Krug and Nina Hagen, and poet Sarah Kirsch. These were, like Biermann, people who actually didn't want to leave the GDR and who didn't want it dissolved, but instead wanted to make it a better state.

Biermann graffiti on the autobahn

But it wasn't just celebrities who protested. In many places, East German citizens became active, distributing leaflets and organizing demonstrations. Anonymous people painted the name "Biermann" in large letters every few kilometers along the highway between Berlin and Leipzig. In German bureaucratese, the Stasi meticulously documented these "hostile-negative, provocative-demonstrative and other politically operationally significant acts committed by citizens of the GDR in relation to the revocation of Biermann's citizenship." The case file lists several thousand incidents,

campaigns and leaflets.

The whole event ultimately backfired for the East German leadership. Wolf Biermann's expatriation actually kick-started the popularity of his banned songs. His Cologne concert was aired repeatedly on West German television, which many people in the GDR secretly watched. Biermann's songs were recorded onto cassettes and distributed clandestinely among friends.

The kick-off of citizen opposition

"The GDR could not collapse simply because it had chased some man with a guitar into exile in West Germany," Biermann said, retrospectively analyzing his role in the book *Die Ausbürgerung* (The Expatriation). "What shook up Germany back then, and particularly the GDR itself, were the protests against this expatriation. No member of the East's savvy power apparatus could have reckoned with this because no one had experienced it before."

The protests were "the beginning of a citizen opposition that expanded over the years," said Stadt, who is part of a university team researching the SED, or the East German Communist Party. "People took the Biermann case as an opportunity to say, 'You expelled Biermann — I want out, too.'" These numbers kept on growing: By mid-1989, between 100,000 and 150,000 applications for emigration had been submitted.

No more 'wire bandage' around Berlin

The Berlin Wall fell on November 9, 1989. The mass exodus to the West, facilitated by Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms, which assured other Eastern Bloc states of independence, and the pressure of peaceful demonstrations led to the collapse of the communist SED regime in East Germany.

Three weeks later, on December 1, Biermann gave a concert in Leipzig. It was his first performance in the GDR since his expatriation 13 years before. It also marked the end of his 25-year East German performance ban, which had remained in effect after he was forced into exile. He again sang the "Ballad of the Prussian Icarus," but this time around, the GDR was no longer an "island country girded by wire." Instead, the borders were open.

A concert and reading event with Wolf Biermann and his wife, Pamela Biermann, along with Chinese dissidents [Liao Yiwu](#), Wang Dan and Peigen Wang, is held on November 4 to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Tiananmen Square Massacre.

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