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# Another East Germany Was Possible – 1989 and the November 4 demonstration

Thursday 19 December 2019, by [PEGLAU Andreas](#) (Date first published: 11 April 2019).

**The scenes of thousands of East Germans passing through the Berlin Wall crossing on November 9, 1989 are remembered as the end of the Cold War. But on November 4, almost a million had demonstrated for reform – and they wanted to create democratic socialism on East German soil.**



*The demonstration marches through Alexanderplatz, November 4, 1989. Ralf Roletschek / roletschek.at*

At the beginning of 1989 nobody believed that a change in power was possible in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), either in the East or in the West. [Erich Honecker](#), general secretary of the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED) and chairman of the State Council, declared in mid-January of that year: “The Wall will continue to exist in fifty and even one hundred years’ time if the reasons for its existence have not been resolved.”

That his assessment was widely accepted is evidenced by a decision taken by the conservative West German publisher Axel Springer around the same time. For decades, its popular newspapers and magazines (including the tabloid *Bild*) had placed the initials “GDR” in quotation marks, as a way to question the East German state’s legitimacy. This practice was now to end.

Nine months later, the situation was fundamentally different. Tens of thousands of East Germans had left their country for the West over the summer, mostly through the newly opened Hungarian border to Austria. Oppositional groupings like the [New Forum](#) were rapidly gaining a mass following, and growing numbers of people in Leipzig and other cities were calling for political reforms at weekly so-called “[Monday demonstrations](#).”

On October 7, the fortieth anniversary of the GDR’s founding, the leaders of the SED continued to pretend like everything was fine in the country. Police and state security officers struck out again, both literally and figuratively, when citizens tried to protest against the official celebrations that night. The Politburo forced Honecker into early retirement on October 18 and replaced him with Egon Krenz as general secretary. The GDR-wide demonstrations continued to grow, however, and on November 9 the Berlin Wall crossing was opened.

Today, the official telling of the story tends to summarize events as follows: the citizens of the GDR had long been sick of their state, and took to the streets in order to finally be able to live like their brethren in the West. Then came the opening of the Wall, reunification, and with it the freedom East Germans had been yearning for all those years. According to this false narrative, the [East German Wende](#) (“turn,” the German word used to denote that historic event today) was crowned by the fall of the Berlin Wall. But that is not how things were always destined to be.

## Another Socialism Was Possible

In fact, November 9 marked the end of earlier popular attempts to initiate a political turn *within the GDR*. The revolutionary energy that had animated the initial protest movement soon fizzled out, diffusing into the neighboring West through the open border. Rather than continuing to reform the GDR’s in many ways ailing political system, the majority of East Germans soon began to demand their smooth incorporation into the West German system — one that was itself by no means open to change.

The pace of this shift demonstrated that the masses’ interest in renewing the GDR could not have been as great as it briefly appeared to be before the Wall came down. Though GDR opposition activists temporarily mobilized massive numbers of people, many of them soon hung their coats back up, so to speak, when faced with the new wind blowing from the West. A large number of the activists themselves did the same. This psychoanalyst might add that the [authoritarian character structures](#) prevalent across German society, which were never properly dealt with after the war in either East nor West, could not handle the prospect of true freedom and self-responsibility.

West German chancellor Helmut Kohl’s seductive declaration that Western Deutschmarks would transform the East into a “blossoming country” thus fell on fertile ground. Liberal and conservative forces won an overwhelming majority in the first non-state-controlled elections to the East German parliament, the *Volkskammer*, on March 18, 1990, and on October 3 the GDR was annexed into the Federal Republic.

Yet the vision that initially motivated the *Wende* had nothing to do with an immediately reunified Germany. It was mostly driven by something else: “real,” “proper,” “democratic socialism,” along with the adoption of perestroika and glasnost such as [Mikhail Gorbachev](#) was propagating in the Soviet Union.

The protesters also called for the abolition of the SED’s absolute rule, democratic elections, legalization of the civil rights movements sprouting up around the country, freedom of press and assembly, dissolution of the Ministry for State Security (also known as the “Stasi”) and an end to surveillance by the secret services. This was to be combined with an unvarnished reappraisal of GDR history — including the role of Stalinism — a frank discussion of the country’s economic woes and environmental problems, and an end to press censorship and the dulling of the public mind by the country’s conformist media. Other demands included the introduction of nonauthoritarian school models, and even more bicycle lanes. In other words: an explosive and colorful mix of creative suggestions for reforming and improving the German Democratic Republic — *not abolishing it*.

## Voices of November 4

Numerous documents prove this initial thrust of the *Wende* in the GDR, including GDR state television’s live broadcast of the [demonstration on November 4, 1989](#) at Berlin’s Alexanderplatz, about which hardly anyone talks about today. Between 500,000 and one million people followed a

call put out by the East Berlin theater scene to take to the streets for a democratic-socialist East Germany. It was the largest spontaneous, nonstate-led rally in the history of the GDR.



*Masses of protesters gathered in front of the small stage on Alexanderplatz.  
Bernd Settnik / German Federal Archive*

The march began at ten in the morning in downtown Berlin, extending from Prenzlauer Allee through Karl-Liebknecht-Straße to the Palace of the Republic, continued to Marx-Engels-Platz, and finally went through Rathausstraße to end at Alexanderplatz, the heart of East Berlin. It spanned the entire city center, including the headquarters of the most important state institutions (the State Council, the Foreign Ministry, the SED Central Committee, the parliament, city hall), before the closing rally, lasting over three hours, began on Alexanderplatz.

The rally was opened by the actress [Marion van de Kamp](#):

Dear colleagues and friends, co-thinkers and those remaining here! We, the staff of Berlin's theaters, welcome you. The street is the tribune of the people — everywhere where it is excluded from the other tribunes. This is not a manifestation taking place, but a [socialist protest demonstration](#).

A variety of figures rose to speak on a small podium — prominent actors, writers, singer-songwriters, scientists, one lawyer, two theologians, the former head of the GDR's intelligence-gathering agency, members of the Politburo and of the SED rank and file, the New Forum, the [Initiative for Peace and Human Rights](#). They were surrounded by a sea of people who added their own views and demands through emotionally charged interjections and homemade banners: "Against monopoly socialism — For democratic socialism!," "No more privileges — We are the people," "No violence — We're staying here!," "Democracy — Not chaos!," "Shared playtime for healthy and disabled children — Remove the barriers!," "Free press for free people," but also warnings against a return to conformism: "Don't let yourselves be turned!"

There can be no question that this was a grassroots democratic mass event of the first order — a milestone not only for the East but all of German history. Or, as the renowned author [Stefan Heym](#) put it on the Alexanderplatz stage:

We overcame our speechlessness in these last weeks and are now learning to walk upright. And that, friends, in Germany, where all revolutions until now have gone awry and where the people have always submitted, under the Kaiser, under the Nazis, and later as well. ... The socialism — not Stalinist, but real socialism — that we finally want to build for our benefit and [for the benefit of all of Germany](#), this socialism is unthinkable without democracy. But democracy, a Greek word, means the rule of the people.

Excerpts from other speeches underscore the impulses behind the protest. [Jan Joseph Liefers](#), now a

well-known actor, declared:

The existing structures, the principle structures that have always been inherited do not permit renewal. That's why they must be destroyed. We must [develop new structures](#) for a democratic socialism. And that means, to me, among other things a division of power between the majority and the minorities.

[Marianne Birthler](#), a youth worker in the Berlin school administration and member of the Initiative for Peace and Human Rights:

We are here because we have hope. Hope has [gathered on this square today](#) one-hundred-thousand-fold. Hope, fantasy, insolence, and humor. This hope that finally started to grow in the GDR a few weeks ago was supposed to have been beaten down in the days and nights after the evening of October 7, before it grew to be as big as it is today. ... The question that has not been answered until today is: who gave the orders, who bears the political responsibility?

For [Christa Wolf](#), a leading author and SED member:

I have my difficulties with the word *Wende*. I picture a sailboat whose captain shouts "About ship!" because the wind has turned, and the crew ducks as the ship's mast sweeps across the boat. Is this picture accurate? ... I would speak of revolutionary renewal. Revolutions emerge from below. "Below" and "above" switch places in the value system, and this shift turns the socialist society from its head onto its feet. [Great social movements come into motion](#). ... So, let us dream with our reasoning wide awake: imagine, it's socialism, and no one runs away!

The conclusion of the demonstration was left to the eighty-one-year-old actress [Steffie Spira](#), also an SED member:

In 1933 I went alone into a foreign country. I took nothing with me, but in my head I had several lines from a poem by Bertolt Brecht: "In Praise of Dialectics."

*It will not stay the way it is.*

*Whoever is alive, never say "never."*

*Whoever has recognized his condition, how can he be stopped?*

*And never becomes: already today!*

Another speaker, the Wittenberg theologian [Friedrich Schorlemmer](#), recapitulated the day's significance fifteen years later. Asked in an [interview](#) why he was still proud of his participation on November 4, he explained:

Because at that point the "D" still stood for democracy and not for "Deutschland" or "D-Mark." November 4 was the day when — and that is rare in German history — a democratic awakening took place. Representatives of this tiny people ended the SED's claim to power and with it a dictatorship with clarity, decisiveness, and human fairness.

# How Upright Do We Walk Today?

In light of all this, November 4, 1989 deserves to be highlighted in red and boldly underlined in the writing and depiction of recent German history. Yet despite the surviving TV broadcast, not a single video document of the protest is available for purchase. One can find a [CD containing speeches](#) given at the demonstration, but an edited and shortened audio recording fails to capture both the atmosphere and dimensions of the event, and can at best hint at its significance.



*A demonstrator sticks a protest sign to the front of the East German parliament building on November 4, 1989.*

*Ralph Hirschberger / German Federal Archive*

Thirty years later, there is no better time to look back on and rediscover the spirit behind November 4. After all, many of the political changes demanded for the GDR on that day could just as easily be applied to the agenda in the Federal Republic in 2019. A passage from Stefan Heym's speech captures it best:

But to speak, to speak freely, to walk, to walk upright — that is not enough. Let's also learn to govern. Power does not belong in the hands of an individual, or a small group, or an apparatus, or a party.

He certainly would have consented to adding “or a clique of the ultra-wealthy and corporate executives” to the list, but back then *that* did not seem like a possible danger in the GDR, caught up as it was in the rush of political awakening and renewal. Stefan Heym continued:

All must participate in this power. And whoever exercises it, and wherever, must be subject to the control of the citizens.

That citizens' control (or “glasnost,” or any transparency in politics for that matter) is self-evidently not the reality in today's Germany. The demands for an end to secret service surveillance raised back then on Alexanderplatz were not fulfilled with the end of the GDR. And that's not to mention how much today's Germany needs a critique of the systematically disinforming role of the mass media.

The events of November 4, 1989 thus invite us to reflect, and to make a comparison: how upright do we walk today? The unsettling popularity that the far-right [Alternative für Deutschland](#) (AfD) enjoys particularly in the former East also raises a related question: what happened to all of the courage, creativity, and optimistic spirit that the citizens of the GDR displayed in the fall of 1989?

Finding the answer to this question is made all the more urgent by the fact that the AfD appears to

be [tapping into precisely this potential](#) and perverting it. In the most recent elections in the eastern states, they successfully referred back to the *Wende* in the GDR, printing “Complete the *Wende*” on AfD posters. Misappropriating a central slogan from 1989, they also declared to voters that “We are the people.”

In response, it must be said that “the people” who energized the political earthquake back then had quite different qualities from the dull masses driven by jealousy and hate that the AfD leadership clearly seeks as its own following. Truly completing the *Wende*, on the other hand, would mean finally building democratic socialism here in Germany — just like was called for at Alexanderplatz on November 4, 1989.

**Andreas Peglau**

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**P.S.**

Jacobin, 11.04.2019:

<https://jacobinmag.com/2019/11/east-germany-berlin-wall-november-4>

• ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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