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Heroes of Berlin Wall Struggle

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Abstract

When the Berlin Wall fell 25 years ago, on Nov. 9, 1989, symbolically signaling the end of the Cold War, it was no surprise that many credited President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev for bringing it down.

But the true heroes behind the fall of the Berlin Wall are those Eastern Europeans whose protests and political pressure started chipping away at the wall years before. East German citizens from a variety of political backgrounds and occupations risked their freedom in protests against communist policies and one-party rule in what they called the "peaceful revolution." [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Germany, West Germany, East Germany, Berlin Wall, Cold War, Ronald Reagan, Mikhail Gorbachev, Communism, Soviet Union

Disciplines

Cultural History | Diplomatic History | Eastern European Studies | European History | History | Military History | Political History | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies | Social History | Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies

Heroes of Berlin Wall Struggle



East German activists prepared the way for the fall of the Berlin Wall, usually credited to Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev. Associated Press

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By William D. Bowman

When the Berlin Wall fell 25 years ago, on Nov. 9, 1989, symbolically signaling the end of the Cold War, it was no surprise that many credited President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev for bringing it down.

But the true heroes behind the fall of the Berlin Wall are those Eastern Europeans whose protests and political pressure started chipping away at the wall years before. East German citizens from a variety of political backgrounds and occupations risked their freedom in protests against communist policies and one-party rule in what they called the "peaceful revolution."

Lutheran pastors, for example, made their churches available as safe spaces from which protests and marches could be planned and organized. From the St. Nicholas Church in Leipzig, Christoph Wonneberger became a central figure in the East German-based "peace prayer" protests. He showed tremendous bravery in the fall of 1989 as he helped coordinate and broadcast the news of the large-scale demonstrations in the streets of Leipzig.

Women were also major contributors to the East German protest movements of the 1970s and '80s. Katja Havemann and Bärbel Bohley were cofounders of New Forum, the main organ of opposition to the East German state in the autumn of 1989. They, along with Ulrike Poppe, founded a group called "Women for

Peace," helped create networks of dissenters, and gave direction and leadership to the entire anticommunist project.

Vera Lengsfeld was raised to be a defender of the Socialist Unity Party, the ruling party in East Germany, but as early as the 1970s became one of its most radical critics. Freya Klier, who dedicated her life to the defense of human rights, was thrown out of her native East Germany in 1988, and from West Germany remained active in protest movements.

Artists and intellectuals were also prominent in the reforms. Wolf Biermann was known for his protest poetry and songs, which he continued abroad for years after being stripped of his East German citizenship.

Christoph Links, a journalist, tested through his publications the intellectual limits of anticommunism in East Germany. His publishing house specialized in materials critical of the old regime; it became one of the best chronicles of the "peaceful revolution" and has been successful in a reunified Germany.

Aram Radomski, a photographer who had been beaten and imprisoned by the Stasi, worked with the West to document environmental abuses in the East and provided video footage of the street protests of 1989.

The fall of the Berlin Wall meant a better life for East Germans and Eastern Europeans. It also symbolized the fall of communism in Europe. The United States, now the only remaining superpower, reevaluated the need for military strength in Europe, resulting in fewer troops being stationed in post-Cold War Europe.

Nelson Mandela was released shortly after the fall of the wall, and the West then turned more of its attention to ending apartheid in South Africa. Other African nations began reaching out to the West rather than the Soviet Union. In addition, the Cold War had passed without any nuclear confrontation.

While Reagan and Gorbachev made the headlines in 1989, too little credit for the fall has gone to East German civic, intellectual, artistic, and religious leaders, who had been at the forefront of protest movements for several decades. They are the largely forgotten architects of 1989.

Historians and others have at times taken the citizens of the former Eastern bloc countries to task for supposedly being too passive in the face of communist oppression. But leading up to November 1989, East Germans had been quite active and effective in forcing the pace of change and preparing the way for the fall of the Berlin Wall, and they deserve our appreciation on this anniversary.

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