

The Fall of the Berlin Wall in Photos: An Accident of History That Changed The World By Katrin Bennhold

Required Annotations		Student-Created Annotations		Summary / Questions / Reflection	
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BERLIN — When Werner Krätschell, an East German pastor and **dissident**, heard that the Berlin Wall was open, he did not quite believe it. But he grabbed his daughter and her friend and drove to the nearest checkpoint to see for himself.

It was the night of Nov. 9, 1989. As their yellow Wartburg advanced unimpeded into what had always been an off-limits security zone, Mr. Krätschell rolled down the window and asked a border guard: “Am I dreaming or is this reality?”

“You are dreaming,” the guard replied.

It had long been a dream for East Berliners like Mr. Krätschell to see this towering symbol of unfreedom running like a scar of cement and barbed wire through the heart of their home city ripped open.

And when it finally became reality, when the Cold War’s most notorious armed border opened overnight, and was torn apart in the days that followed, it was not in the end the result of some carefully crafted **geopolitical** grand bargain.

It was, at the most basic level at least, the wondrous result of human error, spontaneity and individual courage.

“It was not predestined,” said Anne Applebaum, the historian and columnist. “It was not a triumph of good over evil. It was basically incompetence — and chance.”

In the early evening of that fateful November day, a news conference took a historic turn.

Against the backdrop of mass protests and a wave of eastern German refugees that had already fled the country via Hungary and what was then Czechoslovakia, Günter Schabowski, the leader of the East Berlin Communist Party, convened journalists to announce a series of reforms to ease travel restrictions.

When asked when the new rules would take effect, Mr. Schabowski paused and studied the notes before him with a furrowed brow. Then he stumbled through a partially intelligible answer, declaring, “It takes effect, as far as I know... it is now... immediately.”

It was a mistake. The **Politburo** had planned nothing of the sort. The idea had been to **appease** the growing resistance movement with minor adjustments to visa rules — and also to retain the power to deny travel.

But many took Mr. Schabowski by his word. After West Germany’s main evening news, popular with East Germans who had long stopped trusting their own state-controlled media, effectively declared the wall open, crowds started heading for checkpoints at the Berlin Wall, demanding to cross.

At one of those checkpoints, a **Stasi** officer who had always been loyal to the regime, was working the night shift. His name was Lt. Col. Harald Jäger. And his order was to turn people away.

As the crowd grew, the colonel repeatedly called his superiors with updates. But no new orders were forthcoming. At some point he listened in to a call with the ministry, where he overheard one senior official questioning his judgment.

“Someone in the ministry asked whether Comrade Jäger was in a position to assess the situation properly or whether he was acting out of fear,” Mr. Jäger recalled years later in an interview with *Der Spiegel*. “When I heard that, I’d had enough.”

“If you don’t believe me, then just listen!” he shouted down the line, then took

the receiver and held it out the window.

Shortly after, Mr. Jäger defied his superiors and opened the crossing, starting a domino effect that eventually hit all checkpoints in Berlin. By midnight, triumphant easterners had climbed on top of the wall in the heart of the city, popping champagne corks and setting off fireworks in celebration.

Not a single shot was fired. And no Soviet tanks appeared.

That, said Axel Klausmeier, director of the Berlin Wall Foundation, was perhaps the greatest miracle of that night. “It was a peaceful revolution, the first of its kind,” he said. “They were prepared for everything, except candles and prayers.”

Through its history more than 140 people had died at the Berlin Wall, the vast majority of them trying to escape.

There was Ida Siekmann, 58, who became the first victim on Aug. 22, 1961, just nine days after the wall was finished. She died jumping from her third-floor window after the front of her house on Bernauer Strasse had become part of the border, the front door filled in with bricks.

Peter Fechter, 18, became the most famous victim a year later. Shot several times in the back as he **scaled** the wall, he fell back onto the eastern side where he lay for over an hour, shouting for help and bleeding to death, as eastern guards looked on and western cameras whirled.

The youngest victim was 15-month-old Holger H., who suffocated when his mother tried to quiet him while the truck his family was hiding in was being searched on Jan. 22, 1971. The parents made it across before realizing that their baby was dead.

For the first half of 1989, it was still nearly impossible to get out of East Germany: The last killing at the wall took place in February that year, the last shooting, a close miss, in April.

The Soviets had **squashed** an East German uprising in June 1953 and suppressed similar rebellions in Hungary in 1956 and Prague in 1968. In June 1989, just five months before the Berlin Wall fell, the Communist Party of China committed a massacre against democracy protesters in Tiananmen Square. “They had been shooting people for 40 years,” said Ms. Applebaum, the historian. “No one knew what they would do in 1989.”

But 1989 proved different. In the end, what gave people courage to resist were a series of shocks that had already shaken Soviet Communism to the core.

Poland’s successful Solidarity movement, which had **culminated** in a semi-free election that year, was one. Others included a series of social and political reforms across Soviet-controlled Eastern Europe with which the Soviet leader Mikhail S. Gorbachev hoped to preserve — not end — his Communist Party’s control. And perhaps most important, Ms. Applebaum said, belief in the system had long evaporated. “The ideology had collapsed and people just didn’t believe in it anymore,” she said.

That is how the little things that culminated in this historic moment could become big things, said Timothy Garton Ash, professor of European history at Oxford University. But that is sometimes misunderstood.

“We took one of the most non-linear events and turned it into a linear version of history,” said Mr. Garton Ash.

The fall of the Berlin Wall became the end of history and liberalism the unchallenged model of modernity. Now illiberalism, Chinese-style, is challenging the West.

Complacency is dangerous, said Ms. Applebaum: “The lesson is: Societies that

don't reform, die."

Mr. Krätschell, the pastor, had been among those demanding reforms and protesting the system with peaceful means. He held dissident meetings in his home and was harassed by the Stasi, East Germany's fearsome secret police, for years. The churches played an important role in the resistance movement against East Germany's Communist authorities.

"We knew: All the phone calls were bugged," said Mr. Krätschell, now 79.

Years later, after reading his own Stasi file, he learned that special commandos had bugged his home, updating the technology whenever he was on holiday with his family.

Soon after Mr. Krätschell, the pastor, had driven across the border on Nov. 9, 1989, a friend of his daughter who was also in the car asked him to pull over. She was 21 and pregnant and had never set foot in the West before.

Once Mr. Krätschell had parked, she opened the door, stuck her leg out, and touched the floor with her foot. Then she smiled triumphantly.

"It was like the moon landing," recalled Mr. Krätschell, "a kind of Neil Armstrong moment."

Later, back in the East, she had called her parents and said, "Guess what, I was in the West."

The unbelievable night the Berlin Wall fell

By Peter Robinson

November 8, 2019

Peter Robinson, a former White House speechwriter who drafted President Reagan's 1987 Berlin Wall address, recalls the historic events that followed the president saying, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!"

Two scenes from the end of the Cold War:

Scene one: On June 12, 1987, President Reagan stood before the Berlin Wall, the Brandenburg Gate rising behind him, to challenge to the leader of the Soviet Union. "General Secretary Gorbachev," the president said, "if you seek peace, if you seek prosperity for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, if you seek liberalization, come here to this gate.

"Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!"

Scene two: On Nov. 9, 1989, just 29 months after Reagan's speech, the Berlin Wall fell. Responding to weeks of protests across East Germany, the East German politburo met in emergency session, hoping to **quell** the protests with new **diktats**.

When a member of the politburo mistakenly announced that the East German regime had lifted all border controls, East Berliners began streaming to the wall. As the crowds grew, one border guard, unable to obtain orders from his confused superiors, opened his gate. Guards at the remaining checkpoints followed his example.

Thousands of East Berliners rushed into West Berlin, which took on the air of a giant street party. While some Berliners danced atop the wall, others mounted a run on hardware stores, buying every sledgehammer and pickaxe they could find to begin demolishing the structure.

Did Reagan's 1987 speech prompt the events of 1989? Since I drafted the address, I've pondered that. And though I've found no direct or immediate link, conversations over the years have led me to conclude that it mattered.

Consider the account of Ulrike Marschinke, who grew up in East Berlin. “When I heard Mr. Reagan say, ‘tear down this wall,’” Marschinke once told me, “I thought to myself, ‘What a strange idea!’ I only knew the world with the wall. I couldn’t imagine how it would work to live without the wall. It was impossible for me to understand what would happen.”

Or listen to Otto Bamel. A West German diplomat, Bamel lived in East Germany when the wall came down. “I didn’t believe this could happen,” he told me.

Strange. Unimaginable. Unbelievable. The Berlin Wall seemed so immovable — such a fixed part of everyday life and of the entire Communist outlook and philosophy — that the very idea of life without it seemed inconceivable.

Reagan thus spoke the unspeakable.

He helped create for people in the East a new sense of the possible. If an American president could call on the leader of the Soviet Union to tear down the Berlin Wall — if that could happen — what else might prove possible?

Reagan was not alone in calling for freedom, of course. Pope John Paul II, Margaret Thatcher, Lech Walesa, Vaclav Havel and others all denounced the Communist **regimes** of Eastern Europe. Yet Reagan alone spoke in the tradition of America’s Cold War presidents.

Like President Harry Truman, who bucked Stalin’s 1948 blockade of West Berlin by flying supplies to the city in the Berlin Airlift. And John F. Kennedy, who went to Berlin and declared, “Ich bin ein Berliner.”

Reagan spoke, that is, as the leader of the one nation that possessed the military forces capable of **counterbalancing** those of the Soviet Union — and that for more than four decades demonstrated its determination to stand for the cause of liberty. When Reagan called on Gorbachev to tear down the wall, he was only giving voice to the American people.

On this 30th anniversary of the fall of the wall, it’s worth a final glimpse of that second scene. In the words, again, of Otto Bamel:

“Early in the morning we saw a piece of paper on our kitchen table from our youngest boy, Jens, telling us, ‘I crossed the wall. I jumped over the wall at the Brandenburg Gate with my friends. I took my East Berlin friends with me.’

“I said to my wife, ‘Something is wrong.’ Without eating we took our bicycles and went to the border ... There were people crossing the border on foot and in cars and on bicycles and motorbikes. It was just overwhelming. Nobody expected it ... The joy about this event was just overwhelming all other thoughts. This was so joyful and so unbelievable.”

Whatever mistakes we make or bitterness that seeps into our politics, be proud: Throughout the Cold War, Americans stood for one cause — liberty.

Peter Robinson, a former White House speechwriter, drafted President Reagan’s 1987 Berlin Wall address.

Personal Reflection

What will be the Fall-of-the-Berlin-Wall event of your adolescence? What world event do you think could happen that would change the world now in such a fundamental way and change the course of history permanently for the better?
