

Mass Demonstration on Alexanderplatz in East Berlin (November 4, 1989)

Abstract

Unsatisfied with SED promises, as many as 500,000 people gathered in East Berlin on November 4, 1989, to call for further efforts to democratize socialism. They heard apologetic speeches by reform communists and critical appeals by intellectuals.

Source

Christa Wolf, Christoph Hein, and Steffie Spira at the Berlin Demonstration, November 4, 1989

Christa Wolf, Author:

My dear fellow citizens: Every revolutionary movement also liberates the language. Suddenly, that which has been so difficult to say up to now rolls freely from our lips. It amazes us to hear what we have apparently been thinking all along, and what we can now shout out loud: Democracy now or never! And we mean people power. We can remember the attempts in our history which faltered or were beaten down, and we don't want, yet again, to sleep through the opportunity presented by this crisis which has awakened all our productive strength (applause).

I have my problems with the word "turn." I see a sailboat and the captain shouts "Prepare to come about," since the wind has turned or is blowing in his face (applause).

And the crew ducks as the boom sweeps across the deck. But does this image still apply today? Does it still apply in this situation, which is moving further each day? I would speak of revolutionary renewal (applause). Revolutions begin at the bottom. Top and bottom are reversed in the value system, turning the socialist society upside-down, back onto its feet. Major social movements are growing (applause); people in our country have never before spoken so much as in the last few weeks. Never before really spoken with each other, with such passion, such anger and sadness, but also with such hope. We want to use each and every day; we are not sleeping much, if at all. We are getting to know people we have never met before. And we are painfully struggling with others whom we thought we knew. So this is called "dialogue." We demanded it, and now we can hardly stand hearing the word. But we have yet to learn what the word "dialogue" really means. We stare distrustfully at hands suddenly outstretched before us, and at faces that used to be so unmoving. Distrust is good, control is better (applause).

We are reversing old slogans which have hurt and oppressed us; they are being returned to sender. We are afraid of being exploited, used. And we are afraid of turning down a genuine offer. Our whole country now faces this dilemma. And we have to practice the art, not to let this dilemma become a confrontation. We will be given these few weeks, these opportunities, only once, and by ourselves (applause).

We are surprised to see the agile ones, the ones now popularly called the wrynecks [*Wendehälse*] (applause). According to the dictionary, they can adapt quickly and easily to any new situation, responding with skill and knowing how to use it to their advantage. It is these opportunists, I believe, who undermine the credibility of the new policies the most (applause). Alas, we are not yet at the point where we can take them with humor, as we can in other situations. "Free-riders, step down!" I have read on banners. And heard the yells of demonstrators to the police: "Take your uniforms off and join us!"

(applause).

I must say, that's a generous offer. And we are thinking economically as well: "Legal security saves on State Security" (loud applause).

And today I saw an absolutely unbelievable slogan on a banner: "No more privileges for us Berliners" (applause).

Indeed, the language is bursting out of the bureaucratic and newspaper German in which it has been wrapped for so long, and recalling its emotional, expressive vocabulary. One such word is "dream." Let us dream with an alert sense of reason: Imagine there was socialism and no one ran away! (loud applause).

But we continue to see pictures of those leaving, and we have to ask ourselves, "What is to be done?" And the answer echoes, Do something! It is a start when demands become rights – and obligations. Fact-finding committees, constitutional court, administrative reform. There's a lot to be done. And all of it during our spare time. And we still need time to read the newspaper (applause)! We won't have any more time to pay official homage or to attend prescribed demonstrations (loud applause).

This is a rally, authorized and nonviolent. If it stays that way until the end, then we will have learned yet more what we are capable of. And then we will insist upon it (loud applause).

I have a suggestion for the First of May: The leaders march past the people (cheers and loud applause)!

All of that is not from me. It is part of the popular literary heritage. Unbelievable transformation. The people of the GDR have taken to the streets to see themselves as such, as a people. And this is the most important sentence of recent weeks – that which we have shouted thousands of times, "We are the people" (loud applause)! A simple observation, and one we won't forget (applause). [...]

Christoph Hein, Author:

Dear fellow citizens who have found your voices: There is a lot for all of us to do, and we have so little time to do it. The structures of this society must be changed if they are to be democratic and socialist. And this is the only alternative. We must speak of the dirty hands and the dirty laundry. Infiltration, corruption, abuse of power, theft of national property – all these things must be cleared up, and this clarification must extend to the very top of the government; in fact, it must start there (applause).

We must beware of confusing the euphoria we have been experiencing in recent days with the changes that still need to be made. Enthusiasm and demonstrations were, and are, helpful and necessary. But they are not a substitute for work. Let us not be deceived by our own enthusiasm. There is still a lot to do. We're not out of the woods yet! (applause). And there are still a lot of people who do not want to see any changes, who fear a new society, and who have good reason to be afraid (applause). [...]

Let us create a democratic society (applause) with a legal foundation of guaranteed rights. A form of socialism which does not make a mockery of the word. A society appropriate for the people, not subordinating them to its structures. This will mean a lot of work for us all, even a lot of detailed work, worse than knitting. And one more thing. As the saying goes, success has many fathers. Apparently, many believe that the changes in the GDR have already been successful, for many fathers have appeared, reporting such success. Strange fathers (applause).

All the way up to the very top of the government. But I don't think our memories are so bad that we don't remember who began to break down the omnipotent structures, who ended the sleep of reason. It was the reason of the streets, the demonstrations of the people (applause).

Without these demonstrations, the government would not have changed and the work which we have begun would not have followed (applause).

Most important to mention in this context is Leipzig (applause). I believe that the mayor of Berlin, on behalf of all its citizens – since we are all gathered here together – and the Council of State and the Volkskammer should declare Leipzig the “GDR City of Heroes” (loud applause).

[...]

Steffie Spira, Actress:

In 1933 I went alone to a foreign country. I took nothing with me, but I had several lines of “In Praise of the Dialectic,” a poem by Bertolt Brecht, in my head:

Things do not stay the way they are.

Those who live never say never.

Those who have recognized their situation,

how can they be stopped.

And that ‘never’ will yet become ‘today’!

I hope that my great-grandchildren will grow up without a military rollcall, without civics (loud applause), and that no blueshirts[1] with torches will march past high officials (loud applause).

And I have another suggestion: We’ll make a senior citizens’ home out of Wandlitz[2] (loud applause).

Those over 60 or 65 can stay right where they are if they do what I am now doing – stepping down! (Loud, long applause).

NOTES

[1] * Refers to the Free German Youth, the SED youth organization – ed.

[2] ** Walled-off residence of high SED officials – ed.

Source: *40 Jahre DDR – TschüsSED: 4.11.89*. Catalogue for the exhibition on "Initiativgruppe 4.11.89" in the Museum für deutsche Geschichte, East Berlin, and in the Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland Bonn. Bonn, 1990, p. 38 ff.

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