

The Fall of the Berlin Wall (November 9, 1989)

Abstract

Two journalists from *Die Tageszeitung (taz)*, a left-of-center West Berlin newspaper, describe the excitement generated by the sudden opening of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989. The event was the result of internal pressure applied by East German citizens, and it evoked spontaneous celebration from a people who could once again freely cross the border and rekindle relationships with friends and relatives on the other side.

(Please note: the dancing bear mentioned below is a figurative reference to West Berlin's official mascot. Beginning in 1954, the flag of West Berlin featured a red bear set against a white background. In 1990, the bear became the mascot of a unified Berlin. The former West Berlin flag now represents the city as a whole.)

Source

“We Want In!” The Bear Is Dancing on the Border

Around midnight, RIAS – the American radio station broadcasting to the East – still has no traffic interruptions to report. Yet total chaos already reigns at the border checkpoint on Invalidenstrasse. People parked their cars at all conceivable angles, jumped out, and ran to the border. The transmission tower of the radio station “Free Berlin” is already engulfed by a throng of people (from the West) – waiting for the masses (from the East) to break through. After three seconds, even the most hardened *taz* editor finds himself applauding the first Trabi he sees. Everyone gets caught up in the frenzy, whether she wants to or not. Even the soberest members of the crowd are applauding, shrieking, gasping, giggling. Under the watchful eyes of border guards, a few manage to climb over some of the barriers. But going all the way over isn't allowed yet – a visa and the mandatory exchange of currency are still required.

Halfway between East and West, the GDRers stand obediently in line, waiting until their names are called. Stamp: “You can go.” “What now? I don't believe it!” Some have to be pushed into the West. “I'm supposed to go over there now? But where to? I don't have a penny in my pocket.” Many still are afraid they won't be able to return.

Meanwhile, shouts come from the West: “We want in!” For a moment, the focus of attention shifts westward: [Mayor Walter] Momper can be seen in the crowd. Flashlights, microphones, cameras. Then there's no stopping it any longer; the throng from the West pushes further toward the East. At around 1:00 a.m. they begin to run. A handful of guards protect their border.

Gates open, the barrier is raised. Here is the East. Westerners, illegal and without IDs in Mitte [the central district of East Berlin], are still prepared, in the case of emergency, to put up their hands immediately. But confusion reigns on this side of the border; who is East, who is West? The crowds pushing along the sidewalk on Invalidenstrasse are moving in both directions. Amazement on the faces: are you from the other side? Do you want to go over? A green neon light, the first bar along the way, where's the nearest loo? The “Jägerheim” has already shut down; closing time was around midnight. Store windows with their canned vegetables and apple crates stir the imagination: “Soon there will be bananas with pineapples piled on top of them. And the days of quartz watches are already a thing of the past.”

“We Climbed over the Wall”

“To Kudamm!” someone shouts out at the Friedrichstrasse checkpoint. With champagne bottles in hand,

people push their way to the passport inspection; weighed down with baggage, Poles stand by the wayside. Onward to Brandenburg Gate; there are hardly any cars on Unter den Linden, few passers-by. There's no checkpoint here, just the Wall. A French camera team is stationed at the first flower-pot barrier in front of Brandenburg Gate; there are Western journalists, Eastern families. A woman cries out to her son, who is one barrier ahead of her. The son comes back, wanting to get her, but she's afraid: "I don't even want to go over." The next morning we see her again on television: "We were over there; we climbed over the Wall."

But now, around 1:30 a.m., soldiers of the People's Army are gathering, heavily armed, not at all in the mood for partying. Nevertheless, people run toward Brandenburg Gate. "Go back; you are putting yourself in danger of arrest." Hesitation – but up ahead on the Wall are camera teams, so there's no way they can shoot. So: just once through the Brandenburg Gate! Nobody wanted anything more.

Back to the East with all the other Wall jumpers. Around 2 a.m. at Checkpoint Charlie. A convoluted border-crossing, now closed off to cars. The first border inspection lets ten people pass through every twenty seconds. The second guard wants an ID card, a *taz* business card will also do. The third – grimly – wants to look at the visa. Once more the *taz* card, this time along with a bank account card: "That's not allowed, that's not allowed, go on through!" To the waiting crowd: "We don't want you here, go back!" A Westerner greets the *taz* reporter and grabs him by the collar. The next one shakes his hand, thinking he is from the East: "Need an apartment? I have work." Those with a green identity card from the West hold it up; for this they are punched and booed. Shortly after 2 a.m.: for the first time, one hears the first verse of the German national anthem, the Japanese are filming, and the bear – brown and real – is dancing.

Source: Elmar Kraushaar and Gabriele Riedle, "'Wir wollen rein!' An der Grenze tanzt der Bär", *taz*, November 11, 1989.

Translation: Jeremiah Riemer

Recommended Citation: The Fall of the Berlin Wall (November 9, 1989), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/a-new-germany-1990-2023/ghdi:document-174>> [May 08, 2024].