

INTRODUCTION



There were many walls in the GDR. Very few were visible. The most famous of these was erected by the SED leadership on August 13, 1961, between East and West Berlin, so that no one could move from one half of the city to the other unhindered and without express permission. The “green border” between East and West Germany had not been safe to cross since the early 1950s. The SED leadership had finally walled the population in.

But it not only walled in the people; it had also barricaded itself behind mighty walls for fear of them. Until 1960, the regime’s most important representatives lived in the “little town” in Pankow, a northeastern district of Berlin, where the rulers had created an isolated residential park consisting of villas that had survived the war unscathed. The complex was surrounded by fences and screens, with soldiers patrolling the access roads. Since the 1950s, therefore, discussions of the GDR often referred to the “Pankow regime.” For example, Udo Lindenberg’s famous special train went to Pankow in 1983: “Excuse me, is that the special train to Pankow? / I have to go there for a moment, then to East Berlin. / I have to clear something up with your chief Indian.” He was sitting in Berlin-Mitte. Since 1960, however, his residence was located northeast of Berlin in a forest settlement called Wandlitz. Administratively, this “forest settlement” did not belong to the municipality of Wandlitz, but to Bernau.

The settlement consisted of twenty-three single-family houses, a swimming pool, a cultural center, a sales outlet, and premises for the MfS guards. It was surrounded by tightly secured fences. The population has long speculated about the baroque extravagance of the mysterious settlement of the most powerful men—who *were* all men. It was suspected that everything existed in abundance there, especially coveted Western consumer goods that were not available in

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everyday life or only with great difficulty. The leading SED functionaries were said to have a lifestyle that oscillated between aristocratic style and nouveau riche extravagance.

On November 24, 1989, two weeks after the fall of the Wall, even this idea collapsed. Several GDR journalists and an official GDR television team had been allowed to take a look at the militarily protected area. Millions of television viewers could now see that the highest-ranking SED functionaries had spent their leisure time in a petty bourgeois, stuffy world that was not even comfortable to look at. In the sales shop there were Western goods—they had been hurriedly removed days before—and in the kitchens there were products from the “Miele” company standing around. But otherwise everything had a familiar stench to the people of the GDR.

The little television play reached its dramaturgical climax through a chance encounter with Kurt Hager, who together with his wife took a walk behind the walls of “Wandlitz.” Hager, born in 1912, came from a working-class family, passed his school-leaving exams, and, from the late 1920s, belonged to the communist movement. In 1930 he joined the KPD. After the National Socialists came to power in 1933, he was initially imprisoned in a concentration camp and went into exile in 1934. He was interned several times during the Spanish Civil War from 1936 to 1939 for his active involvement. He returned to Germany from exile in Britain in July 1946 and from then on held top positions without interruption—first in the Soviet Zone and then in the GDR. From 1949, the year of the founding of the GDR, he was part of the extended leadership circle in the SED apparatus: from 1955 he was secretary of the Central Committee of the SED, from 1958 a candidate, and, finally, from 1963 a full member of the SED Politburo, the actual center of GDR power. He was responsible for all matters pertaining to culture, art, sciences, and universities, as well as ideology. His unofficial epithet was “head of ideology” or “chief theoretician.” His impressive list of titles was further enhanced by an honorary doctorate in the natural sciences and a professorship at the Humboldt University of Berlin. Even “leading comrades” did not want to completely do without such bourgeois accessories.

This man was not just a cog in the wheel but an important part of the system engine. In mid-November 1989, a television crew suddenly appeared in front of him; this unexpected situation would have been unthinkable in the GDR until that month. And what he said spontaneously helped to further delegitimize the SED and the GDR. Hager said that “Wandlitz” was only a better internment camp, even comparing it to a concentration camp.

At that time, most people laughed about it—even as they were simultaneously outraged. Behind Hager’s admission was the unbroken belief that he was acting on behalf of a higher mission—what the Communists had called the “historical mission of the working class” since Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. And because

this “historical mission” had to be successfully completed, even against resistance, it was necessary that functionaries like Kurt Hager lived in isolation from the people. “Wandlitz” was created because, after the experiences of the failed revolutions of 1953 in the GDR and of 1956 in Hungary, the representatives needed to be particularly well protected in the event of further possible uprisings. In 1989 this was of no use. The singer-songwriter Wolf Biermann, who had moved from Hamburg to East Berlin as a communist in 1953 and who had been denied reentry to the GDR in November 1976 after a concert in Cologne, gave expression to a widespread attitude with a new song he wrote at the end of 1989: “We wouldn’t ever think to bring you ruin / You’re ruined enough on your own / Not vengeance, no, pensions! / In your Wandlitz Ghetto / And peace as your last breath is drawn.”¹

When Biermann performed this song in Leipzig at the first GDR concert after his expatriation on December 1, 1989, it elicited fierce applause and laughter.² The eighty-one-year-old actress Steffie Spira had already ended her speech on November 4, 1989, on Berlin’s Alexanderplatz with the request: “From Wandlitz we’ll make an old people’s home! Those over 60 and 65 can stay there now, if they do what I am doing now—Dismissed!”³ This speech also precipitated laughter and applause.

Kurt Hager was a particularly hated SED functionary. Unlike SED general secretary Erich Honecker, MfS minister Erich Mielke, Education Minister Margot Honecker, or the chief commentator on television, Karl-Eduard von Schnitzler, Hager had drawn the fury of a broad spectrum of the GDR population with a single interview. Until the beginning of April 1987, most people perceived him as one of those SED Politburo members who embodied power in the state, but they did not know his competence or were simply not interested in it. This changed abruptly in spring 1987.

On April 9, 1987, the *stern* published an interview with him that was reprinted in full in the SED central press organ *Neues Deutschland* the following day. In this interview, he recited everything that the SED propaganda machine proclaimed on a daily basis like he was rattling off his prayers: only in the socialist states was there real democracy, millions of people were actively involved in the GDR; only socialism could solve the world’s social and global problems; the East German economy was a success story; there was an independent socialist German nation in the GDR; the GDR media reported realistically about the GDR. The GDR people were used to all this. What was new was that Hager harshly rejected the reform efforts that had been started in the Soviet Union since 1985–86 under CPSU general secretary Mikhail Gorbachev. Up to this point, the slogan “Learning from the Soviet Union means learning to win” had applied. Moscow was the guarantor power of the SED regime. Now the party leaders saw, not unrealistically, that the reforms in the USSR could endanger their own rule.

The *stern* interview was not oral but written. The Hamburg editorial staff had submitted questions that the SED leadership had answered. The SED Politburo had approved the answers on March 18, 1987. Hager later lied that the answers had come from the Foreign Ministry and that he had made the mistake of “sticking too closely to this draft and not using my own style.”⁴ But the answers corresponded exactly to the “style” that Hager and other SED functionaries had always used and which made them appear so colorless. The text was the one approved by the Politburo. Everyone knew this because an SED functionary published nothing in a Western magazine or in *Neues Deutschland* that was not considered an official party statement. Hager’s rejection of a reform of socialism in the sense of Gorbachev culminated in the sentence: “By the way, if your neighbor redecorates his apartment, would you feel obliged to redecorate your apartment as well?”

From that point on, Hager had a new nickname: “Wallpaper Kutte.” The ensuing horror was great and reached far into the SED. For many people in the GDR, it was clear that things could not go on like this. At the same time, a rot continued to expand over the land. Hopelessness and resignation spread. Many tried to leave the country for good. Few were involved in opposition groups. The vast majority remained like the rabbit in front of the snake. Not even retreating into the private sphere was really successful anymore: if you wanted to continue working on your allotted garden plot, you had to line up for hours to get the urgently needed bag of cement, and the tile could only be obtained by exchange or other efforts. “Wallpaper Kutte’s” remarks had engendered such horror because it was quite clear that as long as “they” were in charge, nothing would change.

Only two and a half years later, the reform of socialism was no longer about wallpapering. The foundation walls had been torn down, and soon the foundation was replaced. The pace of these changes left many contemporaries speechless. The phrase “madness”—often heard in November 1989 after the opening of the Wall on the evening of November 9, when millions of people traveled from East to West, drunk with joy—was based on the previously unimaginable experience that an apparently firmly cemented system could disappear from the political map within just a few weeks. This happened at a speed that seemed absolutely impossible even in the summer of 1989. Time took on a new significance in the thinking and lives of many East Germans.

My book aims to explain this paradox: how the GDR remained apparently stable and supposedly calm until the fall of 1989 only to have the state and system collapse within a matter of weeks. At the heart of the account is the question of why the SED regime collapsed in such a short time. Precisely because GDR society was marked by many paradoxes and contradictions—albeit perhaps no more than there were and still are in other societies, but of its very own and in some respects unique kind—my portrayal itself is not free of paradoxes, contradictions, and a frequent “as well as.” This book is not a history of German

unity. It does not even represent the path to German unity. This is about the context that made German and European unification possible in the first place: the social awakening in the Eastern Bloc countries.

Three temporal levels are at the center of the analysis: First, I draw a broad panorama of GDR society to illustrate how the crisis gradually worsened from the mid-1980s onward. In addition, because today quite a few people tend to trivialize the SED state and to gloss over everyday life in the GDR, this account tries to explain why the historical structure of the GDR had no alternative but to end in 1989, and why most people were simply fed up with life behind the Wall. The immediate prehistory of the European events of 1989–90 began in the decade before. In contrast to 1953, 1956, 1961, or 1968, the Polish crisis, despite the declaration of martial law in December 1981, remained an internal affair inasmuch as no armies of foreign states invaded in this case—and yet it was exemplary for the entire Eastern Bloc. When Mikhail S. Gorbachev took power in Moscow in 1985, it quickly became clear that the dynamics of his domestic and foreign policy could lead to results that he had not intended. His merit remains that he did not break off this process by military means, at least not outside the Soviet Union. In the end, the majority of the GDR population thanked the Soviet soldiers, and Gorbachev in particular, for not doing what they had been used to doing in Moscow for decades: bringing up tanks and shooting peaceful people. This homage shows how much dictatorships can turn the achievements of civilization upside down. Because Gorbachev's policies had so many effects on the situation in the GDR, my account begins in the mid-1980s—but one must always bear in mind that Gorbachev was the final answer to the social emancipation movement in the Eastern Bloc that started in Poland and to the deep crisis in the USSR and the entire empire. Although I choose this caesura as my starting point, I will not treat it dogmatically but will also refer back to what came before.

In the second part, I then look at the events from the beginning of 1989 up to the mass demonstration in Leipzig on October 9, 1989, focusing primarily on how, in a deep social crisis that had long been in the offing, those in power were no longer able to do as they wanted, and society no longer wanted what the rulers had previously demanded of it. Within a few weeks, the system, which even international observers had promised would remain stable, collapsed like a house of cards.

Finally, in the third part, I discuss the developments that rapidly intensified once again between Honecker's resignation and the democratic elections of March 18, 1990. There is no question that the fall of the Wall on November 9 considerably increased the pace of these events. But unlike what is often depicted, one must examine this occurrence within the historical process. It was a caesura, but it presents itself somewhat differently from a sociohistorical perspective than if the fall of the Wall were to be regarded as a single event. In this case, one must

present a democratization process with many facets that likewise aimed from the very beginning to achieve the first free democratic elections so that the associated social learning effect becomes more interesting than the result to historical observers. Finally, in the conclusion I discuss the character of the upheaval and why many find it difficult to call it a revolution.

This book does not deal with the history of unification, the unification crisis, unification mistakes, the success of unification, and other such matters but focuses on three major shifts that took place on October 9, 1989, November 9, 1989, and March 18, 1990, each caesura representing new options. March 18, the day of the first free elections in the GDR, marked a special turning point, as democratically legitimized representatives of the people began to engage in politics. Society also drove them, but mostly according to different rules than before. On March 18, 1990, the SED dictatorship as an institution had irrevocably been relegated to history.

Such an undertaking sets limits. My focus is directed toward social processes. I address the large-scale politics, the international interdependence, and not least the developments in Eastern Europe. But my main focus is on society and the various reactions to “large-scale politics.” Precisely because I understand the events of 1989 as a citizens’ movement on a whole, my presentation focuses on those who became citizens in the autumn of 1989 and those who tried to claim and exercise civil rights under the dictatorship even before 1989. This includes my mentioning of “the others” who tried to suppress civil rights in 1989 and before. I mostly write about “GDR people” and only write about “citizens” when they behaved like that because the absence of civil rights also predominantly implies the absence of “citizens” and makes them exceptional where they appear.

This account is based on sources that I found in the Federal Archives, in the archives of the federal commissioner for the MfS files, in archives of the GDR opposition, such as the Robert Havemann Society Berlin and the Archive Citizens’ Movement Leipzig, and in many other archives. I would like to thank their employees for their cooperation. Among the sources I used are daily and weekly newspapers and various periodicals ranging from underground magazines to political, literary, sports, cultural, art, and music journals. I would particularly like to highlight the 125-volume press collection “Germany 1989” and “Germany 1990” published by the Press and Information Office of the federal government.

For historians, it is a matter of course to try to take note of everything that has been published on their subject. However, I have also utilized only verified quotations. The concise bibliography indicates that the special literature is extensive. And because this is not made explicit enough in this book, I would like to mention here a few authors whose works I owe a great deal to for very different reasons: Timothy Garton Ash, Ralf Dahrendorf, Karl Wilhelm Fricke, Hans-Hermann Hertle, Armin Mitter, Patrik von zur Mühlen, Ehrhart Neubert,

Michael Richter, Gerhard A. Ritter, Richard Schröder, André Steiner, Karsten Timmer, and Stefan Wolle. First and foremost, however, are the thirty-three volumes of the two Enquete Commissions of the Bundestag, which met between 1992 and 1998 and dealt with the history and consequences of the SED dictatorship and the process of German unification. In many respects, the volumes represent a treasure trove that cannot be overestimated. Furthermore, I have interviewed many contemporary witnesses for facts and background information, both orally and in writing. I do not name anyone in my book who is not a relative or absolute figure of contemporary history without having consulted with them. I did not rely on others' assessments but got the facts confirmed.

Several times in this introduction I have emphasized my position as a historian. I do not count among the representatives of this guild who claim that there can be objectivity in historical representation. I am a child of my time; my questions are based on my interests. I have assumptions, viewpoints, experiences, ethical principles. I can name them, but I can't hide them. Others may think they can. I don't believe in their miracles. I even consider them to be particularly clever charlatans.

History is reconstruction, the connecting link between past and future. Enlightenment and German idealism are linked to the idea that "history" can be shaped as a human process of self-realization. History is thus removed from the past. Milan Kundera vividly described this abstraction in the construction of the communist dictatorship from personal experience: "What had attracted me to the movement more than anything, dazzled me, was the feeling (real or apparent) of standing near the *wheel of history* . . . we were bewitched by history; we were drunk with the thought of jumping on its back and feeling it beneath us; admittedly, in most cases the result was an ugly lust for power, but (as all human affairs are ambiguous) there was still . . . an altogether idealistic illusion that we were inaugurating a human era in which man (all men) would be neither outside history, nor under the heel of history, but create and direct it."⁵

Historians deal with past(s) and reconstruct history(ies) from them. They dissect myths and demythologize history that has come to be seen as nature.⁶ The myth fears nothing more than its historicization. Historians are interested in the dialectics of nonsimultaneity and simultaneity. They aim to counter the apparent senselessness of the past—"history has no meaning"⁷—to generate a historical sense. They often see themselves as scholarly enlighteners who seek to rationalize their current location-bound status. For the historian, "present" is the state constituted by the past. "Present" has "at best the width of a razor whose blade incessantly cuts off pieces of the future and assigns them to the past."⁸

I research, write, think, and judge the facts presented here differently than someone who mourns the GDR, than someone who believes he can judge objectively, than someone who only knows the zone from files, books, films, fleeting visits, as someone who was born before me, after me, or somewhere different

from me. I know almost none of the events I have described from my own experience: I was neither in the opposition nor in the SED; I was part of the uneven masses in between. I acknowledge the subjective limitations of historical knowledge. This is quite easy to understand: Put two historians in front of the same pile of files and give them the same task. The result will be two completely different books, which may be mutually exclusive—and both can nevertheless quite rightly claim to have worked in accordance with academic standards.

That sounds more abstract than it is meant to be. But all those who presently research and write about 1989/90 and the history leading up to it are contemporary witnesses—regardless of the position they may be in.⁹ A West Berliner looks at events differently than an East Berliner, someone from Frankfurt/Oder differently than someone from Frankfurt/Main, someone from Warsaw differently than someone from Prague. And this is equally true of the differentiated views of memory in one historical location. Both the authors and readers are contemporary witnesses. Even today's grammar school pupils, who were born years after 1989, are contemporary witnesses in that they are shaped by the stories told in their families, even if nothing is told. In other words, a book about "1989" can neither be conceived nor written without reflecting on the fact that anyone who takes it in hand already has a historical picture of the events.

In this respect, my presentation aims to allow the reader to learn something about "1989" and to discuss it. I do not proclaim an objective truth here, but I do proclaim my own, which I would like to present in such a way that it is comprehensible and plausible, even if one does not share it with me. And precisely because I see it that way, I would like to apologize in advance to all those who do not appear in this book. Most of them do not come up, nor are most of the sites of action even mentioned. I know that the events in XYZ were important, that the person ABC played an almost paramount role. But I also know that I have never heard of many XYZs and ABCs, and yet they were all outstanding. But I never intended to write an encyclopedia either—just a simple account of why "1989" occurred and what happened up to the elections on March 18, 1990.

Notes

1. Wolf Biermann, *Alle Lieder* (Cologne, 1991), 412–13. The "Ballade von den verdorbenen Greisen" is recorded on the 1990 LP *Gut Kirschenessen*. I would like to thank my friend Wolf Biermann, who provided me with this authorized translation on August 26, 2021.
2. On this momentous concert, which took place in a freezing cold convention hall and was organized by two Leipzig civil rights activists, see Jay Rosellini, *Wolf Biermann* (Munich, 1992), 140–49. For background information, see Ilko-Sascha Kowalczuk and Arno Polzin, eds., *Fasse*

- Dich kurz! Der grenzüberschreitende Telefonverkehr der Opposition in den 1980er Jahren und das Ministerium für Staatssicherheit* (Göttingen, 2014), 923–31, 938–39.
3. Annegret Hahn, Gisela Pucher, Henning Schaller, and Lothar Scharsich, eds., *4. 11. 89* (Berlin, 1990), 206. The demonstration is documented on the 1999 two-CD edition: *Berlin Alexanderplatz, 4. 11. '89. Die Kundgebung am Vorabend des Mauerfalls*.
 4. Kurt Hager, *Erinnerungen* (Leipzig, 1996), 384.
 5. Milan Kundera, *The Joke* (London, Boston, 1992), 71.
 6. “We reach here the very principle of myth: it transforms history into nature”; Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York, 2012), 240.
 7. Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, with a preface by Václav Havel (London, New York, 2011), 474.
 8. Hans-Ulrich Wehler, “Einleitung,” in *Geschichte und Soziologie*, ed. Hans-Ulrich Wehler, 2nd ed. (Königstein/Ts., 1984), 15.
 9. However, this had considerable effects, as another example persuasively shows: Anna Karla, *Revolution als Zeitgeschichte: Memoiren der Französischen Revolution in der Restaurationszeit* (Göttingen, 2014).