



FIVE

The Revolution Spreads

I was in Moscow when Mikhail Gorbachev came to power on March 11, 1985. The Soviet Union had been stagnating under a progression of doddering old Communist leaders who ruled through fear and inertia. The few people who criticized the system, known as dissidents, were regularly sent to prison, and the government fought desperately to keep Western information and ideas out. But the absence of information served only to push the Soviet Union further behind the West, where widespread access to computerized information was opening a new era. More and more Communists were beginning to understand that unless the system allowed some freedom of expression and thought, it would grind to a halt. Finally the last of the old leaders died and Gorbachev was chosen as the new leader. He had just turned fifty-six, and he was impatient to reform the system from top to bottom.

Charismatic, energetic, and resolute, Gorbachev started to change things on all fronts. In speech after speech, day after day, he demanded a “decisive breakthrough” or “resolute measures.” He called for a complete restructuring—*perestroika*—of the economy; he declared war on alcoholism, which was killing off Russian men at a worrisome rate; he cracked down on government corruption; he called for an end to the cold war with the United States, declaring that it was time to end the “ice age of their relations.” And, most important, he called for more openness in society—the Russian word was *glasnost*, or “giving voice.” For seventy years, it had been a crime for Russians to speak their mind, and suddenly



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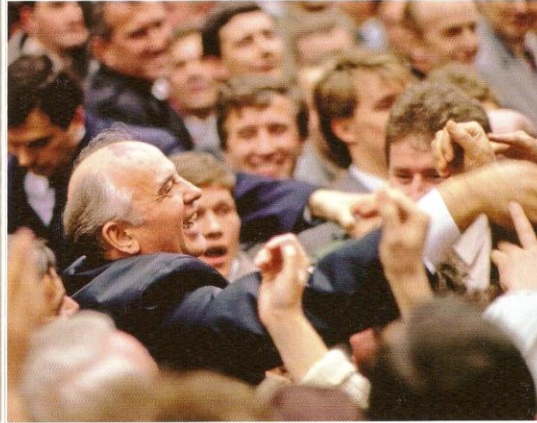
they were being urged to do so. Perhaps Gorbachev was not aware of what he was setting loose; it turned out to be the start of a revolution.

Congressman Thomas P. O'Neill, Jr., the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, was one of the first Western leaders to visit Moscow after Gorbachev came to power, and he was clearly taken by

the new leader. "He appeared to be the type of man who would be an excellent trial lawyer, an outstanding attorney in New York had he lived there," O'Neill said. "There is no question that he is a master of words and a master in the art of politics and diplomacy."

The new approach was immediately felt throughout Soviet society. It was as if a lid had been raised on the pent-up creativity of the nation. Writers who had been hounded by the Kremlin now sang Gorbachev's praises. People flocked to him when he went into the streets, something none of the earlier Soviet leaders ever dared. On one trip to Leningrad, Gorbachev was crushed by well-wishers, including a large, buxom woman who was pressed right up against him. "Just get close to the people and we'll not let you down," she shouted. Gorbachev broke into a big smile and asked, "Can I be any closer?" The crowd loved it.

Soon, the hostilities with the West began to break down. President Ronald Reagan, who had famously called the Soviet Union an "evil empire," met with Gorbachev and was charmed. New arms-control agreements were reached, reducing the threat of a nuclear war. It was a thrilling time to be in Russia, as people began to awaken, to dream, to talk freely.



Gorbachev is surrounded by well-wishers on a visit to Prague, Czechoslovakia, in 1987.

The excitement soon spread to Moscow's Eastern European allies. Until then, relations with these countries were dictated by what was known as the Brezhnev Doctrine: If any country tried to break away from Soviet control, Moscow claimed the right to intervene by force, as it had in Berlin in 1953, in Hungary in 1956, and in Czechoslovakia in 1968. No more, Gorbachev said.

The Eastern Europeans were free to go their own way, and Moscow would not interfere. The new policy came to be jokingly called the "Sinatra Doctrine" after Gorbachev's witty spokesman, Gennady Gerasimov, told reporters, "The Brezhnev Doctrine is dead. You know the Frank Sinatra song 'My Way'? Hungary and Poland are doing it their way. We now have the Sinatra Doctrine." To show that he meant business, Gorbachev pulled Soviet troops out of Afghanistan, where they had been bogged down trying to prop up a Communist government since 1980.

But before the wave of freedom swept through Eastern Europe, it ran into a wall in China. Gorbachev made a visit to Beijing in 1989, inspiring Chinese students to demand the same reforms for their country. They began to hold regular demonstrations in the central square of Beijing, Tiananmen. The crowds rapidly expanded into the millions. But the Communist rulers did not bend; instead, they sent tanks into the square on June 4, 1989, to crush the rebellion in a brutal massacre.

But in Eastern Europe, Gorbachev's glasnost spread like a tsunami. It turned out that the Americans had been right about the domino theory. But instead of the non-Communist countries falling like dominoes to Communism, it was the Communist countries that tumbled.

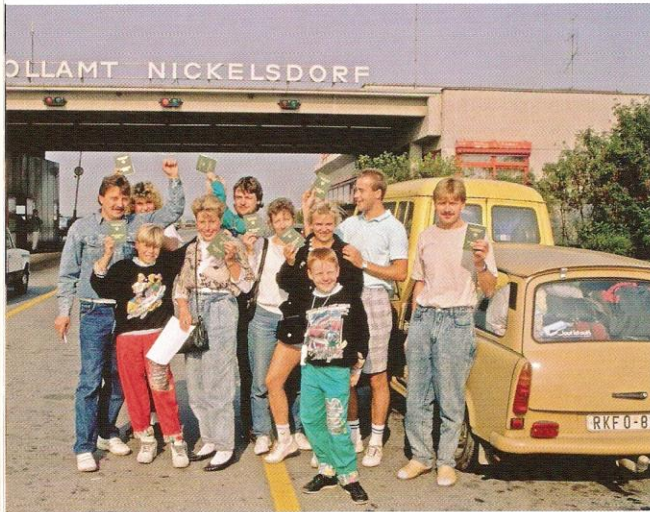
In June 1989 Poland held the first free elections in postwar Eastern Europe. The Solidarity Party, which had sprung from a labor union founded earlier in the decade, won a stunning victory over the Communist Party. That was the first signal that once the Communist parties were left on their own, they stood little chance of winning real elections. The wave swept on to Hungary, and through Hungary reached East Germany.

In August 1989, Hungary announced that it would no longer keep its border with Austria sealed tight the way Communist governments had until then. In effect, the Hungarians opened a crack through the iron curtain. Since East Germans were allowed to travel to Hungary, which was part of the Soviet Bloc, they now had an exit route once again to West Germany, where they were automatically greeted as fellow German citizens. So the East Germans began to flee again, as they had before the Berlin Wall went up. The East German government tried to close the hole by barring their people from going to Hungary, so the East Germans started fleeing to other Eastern European countries, to Poland and Czechoslovakia, flooding the West German embassies within those countries and demanding to be let out. There was no way to stop them.

I remember the excitement in October 1989 when trains packed with escaping East Germans pulled into Hof, in West Germany. More than 6,000 arrived just on that day, bleary-eyed after the ten-hour train trip. Some had spent weeks camped inside West German embassies in Warsaw or Prague. Others had come over at the last minute. One of these was Heike Schubert, a twenty-two-year-old

Lech Walesa,
a founder of the
Solidarity labor
movement, campaigns
for the first Polish
election in May 1989.





East German refugees, escaping across the Hungarian border into Austria, pose with their passports on September 11, 1989.

government was growing inside East Germany. It began when small groups gathered in churches and then held candlelit vigils outside to demand more freedom. The protests rapidly grew into massive weekly marches, especially in the industrial city of Leipzig. I remember standing at the side of the street in Leipzig as wave after wave of marchers swept past in the night, many holding candles. It was a powerful testimony to the people's longing for freedom, and it seemed totally unstoppable. But the East German leader, Erich Honecker, was deaf to the protesters' demands. He was defiantly preparing huge celebrations to mark the fortieth anniversary of East Germany in October, and his security chiefs were ominously talking of the "Chinese solution." Something had to give.

Honecker was a tough old Communist. A miner's son, he had been a Communist all his life, had studied in Stalin's Moscow, and had been jailed for eight years by the Nazis. When the Soviets had installed a Communist government after World War II, Honecker quickly clambered to the top. He and the old loyalists around

hairdresser from Halle, in East Germany, and her boyfriend, Andreas Stolz, twenty. Crying with relief and fatigue, Heike described how she and Andreas had gone to her parents to tell them they were leaving, and her parents had said, "You go on. We'd do the same if we were young and had the possibility."

At the same time, an even greater challenge to Communist



him were firmly opposed to the reforms Gorbachev was pushing from Moscow. After the massacre in China's Tiananmen Square, Egon Krenz, the East German security chief, had sent a message to the Chinese authorities, congratulating them. Honecker had been in charge of building the wall in 1961, and now, at seventy-seven, he still insisted that it would be standing "another fifty, one hundred years." The words *glasnost* and *perestroika* were barred from East German radio and newspapers, in Russian or German, and Soviet publications were not distributed. Honecker was not about to allow any loosening of the system; on the contrary, he wanted the fortieth anniversary to be a show of strength.

But there was no way Honecker could avoid inviting the leader of the Soviet Union to attend, and in early October, Mikhail Gorbachev arrived in East Berlin. Wherever he went, the Russian leader drew crowds of cheering pro-democracy demonstrators. On the evening of October 6, Gorbachev stood at Honecker's side for a torchlight parade of Communist youths; on the next day, October 7, Gorbachev was again at Honecker's side at a formal military parade. But it was the last hurrah of the old regime. Before he left East Berlin, Gorbachev spoke with a group of journalists: "I believe that dangers await only those who do not react to life." It was clear to Honecker that unless he started responding to the demands for more freedom, he would be cast aside.

Inspired by Gorbachev, several members of a small new opposition movement, New Forum, called for a demonstration on October 7 on East Berlin's main square, Alexanderplatz. New Forum had been formed by left-wing intellectuals who did not want to flee west and who did not want a reunification with the capitalist West. They wanted a reformed, Socialist East Germany, and Gorbachev was their hero.



(Center) As part of a ceremony marking the withdrawal of Russian troops from Hungary in May 1989, a Soviet soldier dances with a Hungarian in national costume.

But as with everything else in those days, the streets set their own pace and their own agenda. The demonstration quickly swelled into a massive protest. I remember wondering where on earth all these people were suddenly materializing from. Only the day before, thousands of docile East German Communist youths had marched through these same streets. Now thousands of pro-reform youths were chanting "Gorby! Gorby!"

The police were as surprised as I was. They stood in front of the bridge across the Spree River to block the demonstrators from the parliament and the row of embassies and official buildings along the Unter den Linden boulevard. But the police were not used to demonstrations. The crowd began to throw coins at the officers, as if to say that they had sold out to the Communist bosses. It was a defining moment: the Gorbachev revolution had come within a stone's throw of the Berlin Wall.

Blocked in one direction, the demonstrators turned toward a working-class district called Prenzlauerberg. There, residents leaned out their windows to cheer, and the crowd grew larger. A line of young Communists with red armbands tried to block one street, but the demonstrators went right through them, chanting "*Keine Gewalt!*"—"No violence!" It was dark now, and the feeling of power and tension was growing by the minute. Finally the police waded in, battering and grabbing demonstrators at random and driving them onto side streets. I was swept back by retreating demonstrators, and before long it was all over. More than a thousand protesters had been arrested. But the demonstrations had been held in full view of Western reporters and television cameras. Power had clearly moved to the streets.

After the protests in Berlin, we shifted our attention to Leipzig, where for three Mondays in a row people had been attending prayers in the Nikolai Church and then marching with candles through the streets. The marches were getting bigger by the week, and after what happened in Berlin, we expected tens of thousands to come out in Leipzig. Honecker expected them too, and unknown to us, he had had enough. His

anniversary party had been ruined; demonstrators had raised riot in his capital, chanting the hated Soviet leader's name. It was time to get tough, to unleash the "Chinese solution." He ordered security forces to prepare to open fire. We later learned that machine guns were mounted on the main post office in anticipation of the march.



I watched the demonstration in Leipzig that Monday evening completely unaware of the danger. About 70,000 people, many with candles, marched peacefully around the Dittrichring, a broad street that went around the city center, chanting "*Wir sind das Volk*"—"We are the people." Security forces made no effort to stop them. Tens of thousands

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more marched in Dresden, Potsdam, and Magdeburg, all peacefully.

Later, after the wall came down, we learned about Honecker's orders, and we heard various versions of why they were not carried out. Egon Krenz, a member of the Politburo (the senior members of the Communist Party who ran East Germany), was in charge of security. He told reporters that he was the one who had countermanded Honecker. "I was in Leipzig. I helped there to see to it that these things were solved politically," he said. But Krenz said this when he was urgently trying to improve his image in order to stay in power. Another version of the story is that the initiative to avoid bloodshed came from Kurt Masur, the celebrated orchestra conductor who was then director of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, and who had held an emergency meeting with Leipzig authorities. Yet another possibility is that the Soviet military commander intervened. Perhaps the current Russian president, Vladimir Putin, who was a KGB officer in East Germany at the time, will reveal the truth someday.



Teenagers burn the East German constitution during a protest in Leipzig in 1989.

However it happened, it was the turning point in Germany's peaceful revolution. The failure of the Communist Party to crush the protests meant the effective end of its authority. Without fear and force, the party had no way of controlling the people. On October 18, Honecker was fired and Krenz was named the new party chief. He lasted barely six weeks in the job. A few years later, Honecker, Krenz, and several other East German leaders were charged with the deaths of people who were shot trying to cross the wall. Honecker was released for reasons of health and moved to Chile, where he died in May 1994 of liver cancer. Krenz spent three years in prison and now lives in quiet retirement in Germany.

With the machinery of repression neutralized, the streets grew rapidly in power. A week later, 100,000 marched through Leipzig; a week after that, the number was 320,000. People in every city and town now began to hold mass meetings at which speakers denounced the ruling Communists. On November 4, half a million people marched through the streets of East Berlin in what Christa Wolf, a popular writer, now referred to as a "revolution from below." Nobody was afraid anymore. We wandered around interviewing people, and they spoke freely and happily. In fact, the four-hour rally was actually broadcast live on East German radio and television. Most of the placards, and most of the speakers, now demanded free speech, free elections, an end to the "leading role" of the Communist Party, and—a demand that got the loudest cheers—a settling of accounts with the despised security police.

One of the speakers was the writer Stefan Heym. "Dear friends and fellow citizens," he said, "this is as if a window has been thrown open after all the years of stagnation in spiritual, economic, and political life, after the years of stupefaction, the thrashing-out of phrases and bureaucratic

arbitrariness, of official blindness, and deafness. What a transformation!”

In the surest sign that life had changed, there was also good humor aplenty. One of the last speakers on that day was a popular actress, Steffie Spira, who before leaving the podium raised a roar of laughter by saying, “I want the government to do what I am about to do. Step down.”

After that, events moved quickly. The headlines in *The New York Times* track the accelerating story: “East Germans Declare Amnesty for Those Who Fled.” “Another Big Rally in East Germany.” “East Germans’ New Leader Vows Far-Reaching Reform and Urges an End to Flight.” “500,000 in East Germany Rally for Change.” November 7: “A Draft Law Grants East Germans the Right to Travel or Emigrate.” November 8: “East Germany’s Cabinet Resigns, Bowing to Protest and Mass Flight.”

And then, November 9.

A father and daughter (left) wear headbands bearing the slogan “No violence” at a protest in East Berlin.





SIX

The Berlin Wall Comes Tumbling Down

When I woke up in my West Berlin hotel that morning, I knew it would be a big day, but there was no way I could have guessed how big. East German officials had called a press conference, and we had heard that they were planning to announce changes in the despised Travel Law, which prevented East Germans from traveling to the West. The press conference was in East Berlin. That meant I had to cross the Berlin Wall.

Unlike the East Germans, I could cross the border anytime with my American passport. But it was not easy. There were only two crossing points for foreigners, one for crossing by train and one for cars. I always drove because I needed a car in East Berlin, and that meant passing through Checkpoint Charlie. The name Charlie came from the military alphabet—Checkpoints Alpha and Bravo were at either end of the highway from West Germany to West Berlin, and Checkpoint Charlie crossed from West Berlin into East Berlin on what had been one of the main streets of the old capital, Friedrichstrasse (Friedrich Street).

In the days before the wall fell, I made the crossing often—sometimes several times a day. Often there was a long line of cars waiting to get into the large roofed area, where East German guards carefully checked my passport and waited until I exchanged twenty-five West German marks (about fourteen dollars at the time) for twenty-five East German marks, which were worth a lot less and could be used only in East Germany. The exchange was a way for East Germany to get valuable Western currency—“real money”—that the government could use to buy things in the West.

The guards looked under the car with mirrors. Later, on the way out, they would even stick a long rod into the gas tank to make sure I wasn't smuggling someone out. It took at least half an hour to get through, more if there was a long line of cars.

I never got over the feelings of tension and irritation that came with entering a police state. There were no mobile phones then, so once I was through the checkpoint it was very difficult to make a telephone call back to the West. On the Eastern side, an American correspondent was regarded with suspicion, and I always assumed that I was being followed.

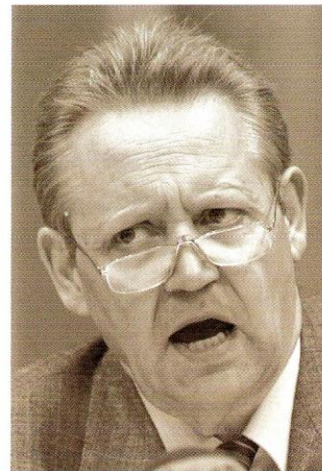
I drove through the checkpoint into the grayness of East Berlin, met Viktor, who served as my translator, and headed for the press conference.

There, Günter Schabowski, a member of the Politburo, announced that the government was introducing new regulations that would make it far easier and far quicker for East Germans to get permission to visit the West. But the way Schabowski phrased it left many questions unanswered.

"Personal travel abroad can be applied for without any extra requirements," he said. "The relevant passport and registration departments are instructed to promptly grant exit visas for permanent departure..." What did this mean? That anyone could get a permit anytime? Starting when? It would take some time to get the details straight, and I wanted to get back through Checkpoint Charlie before the other reporters, so I decided to go back to West Berlin as soon as the press conference was over. I figured the details would be on the radio later, and I wanted to get a head start on the story.

After I left—at 6:57 p.m., to be exact—Schabowski was besieged by reporters. Tom Brokaw, the NBC anchorman, asked Schabowski in English if he meant to say that the Berlin Wall was open. Schabowski did not speak English too well and probably did not fully understand the question. Whatever he thought it meant, he answered "Yes."

Günter Schabowski of the East German Politburo started a rush to the Berlin Wall with his announcement on November 9, 1989, that travel restrictions would be lifted.





Border guards hold back a crowd of excited spectators at the opening of the Berlin Wall.

news from West Berlin. So the news swept through East and West Berlin, and beyond, like a grass fire. In Bonn, the news interrupted a debate in parliament and all the legislators rushed to television sets. Berliners on both sides dropped whatever they were doing to listen, and many spontaneously headed for the wall.

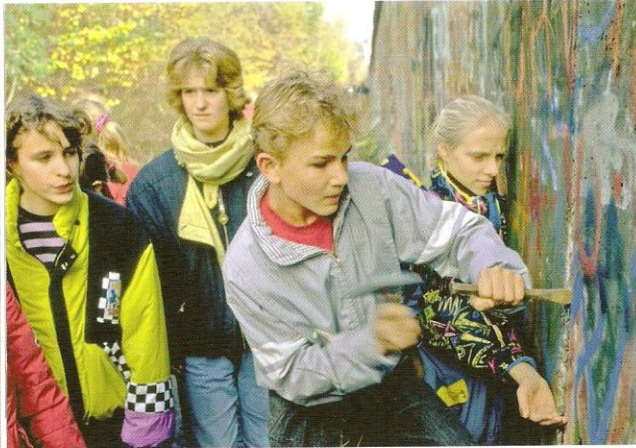
In East Berlin, an American diplomat was on his way home at ten p.m. He was amazed to find scores of little East German Trabant cars parked every which way near one of the wall crossings set up for Germans, as if the drivers had jumped out in a great rush. On the other side, Western television cameras had already gathered and had their lights trained at the crossing. The crowds rapidly grew to dangerous size. But the East German border troops had no orders, except the old ones, which were to shoot anyone trying to cross without authorization. Viktor rushed to the Invalidenstrasse crossing as soon as he heard the news on the radio and waited with the growing crowd as the border guards just stood around with their automatic rifles, unsure of what to do. People were squeezed right up against the barriers, and the push was getting worse by the minute.

That was it. Within minutes, West German television and radio were reporting that travel to the West was possible immediately. All West German stations deliberately beamed their broadcasts across the wall, and most East Berliners routinely tuned in to

The officer in charge realized that if this continued the people would either break through or be crushed. Finally, at 11:14 p.m., he gave what turned out to be a historic order: Throw open the gates! With the pent-up pressure of decades of division propelling them, thousands burst through the opening and into the arms of waiting West Germans. People wept, hugged, popped bottles of champagne. Viktor was among the first ones through. A West German embraced him and tried to give him some champagne. But Viktor pleaded with the man to take him to my hotel. He had never been to West Berlin and he had no idea where it was. Within minutes, he was pounding on my door.

On the first day after the wall opened, 800,000 East Germans came across. The party went on for days as millions of Berliners passed back and forth. Under West German law, every East German arriving in the West was entitled to a one-time gift of “welcome money”—*Begrüßungsgeld*—of one hundred marks, about fifty-four dollars at the time. Long lines formed at banks for what East Berliners believed was a princely sum, until they discovered what prices were like in the West. At the checkpoints, where border guards used to prod gas tanks and probe under seats for would-be escapees, the police now mingled happily with people going back and forth unhindered. “We were as surprised as everyone else,” said one smiling guard. Amazingly, East Germans did not try to stay in the West. Almost all of them headed home after a day of shopping and partying, now certain that the wall would never be closed again.

Soon East Germans started coming across in their primitive Trabant and Wartburg cars. For the West Germans, whose cars were the best in the world, these small, stinky, and noisy cars were a joke, and they took to giving the Trabants, which are made of plastic and pressed wood, a few friendly slaps on the roof—“Trabi-thumping,” we called it. West Germans also began crossing eastward, wandering through historic districts of East Berlin and discovering a Germany that had changed far less than the West, at least physically, since World War II.



The day after the wall opened, a young German participates in the latest craze, chipping a piece from the Berlin Wall to keep as a souvenir.

The wave of freedom continued to move through Eastern Europe after that, sweeping over Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, and finally Romania. I hopped around Eastern Europe all that year, witnessing the power of people who wanted to be free. One memory sticks out in particular. In November 1989 I was on the vast Wenceslas Square in Prague, the capital of Czechoslovakia. A light, wet snow was falling, but a quarter of a million people packed every inch of the square, all merrily jangling their keys to “ring out” the old regime.

There were violent clashes, to be sure, but for the most part it was bloodless. The exception was in Romania, which became the last of the Eastern European states to overthrow its Communists and the only one to do it brutally. Nicolae Ceausescu, the Romanian Communist dictator, had established a massive personality cult—his portrait hung on every billboard, and he maintained a ruthless control of his people through the Securitate, the secret police. He was not about to exit peacefully.

The revolution reached Romania late in 1989—on December 16, to be exact, when a government move against a dissident priest in the western city of Timisoara grew into mass protests and riots. The security forces crumbled before the onslaught, and Ceausescu and his wife, Elena, tried to flee. But they were captured and, on Christmas Day, 1989, shot by a ragtag bunch of soldiers.

People began to chip away at the hated wall. It became a national obsession: Break down the wall! Stores soon ran out of chisels and hammers. From my hotel I could hear the banging all night. One night, I went out myself and chipped away until I smashed my thumb. (Chunks of the wall are on sale to this day at souvenir shops in Berlin.)

(Near right) teenager shows her East German passport as she passes through the wall to visit West Berlin for the first time.

(Far right) Soviet East and West German border guards mingle the crowds.

(Bottom) West Germans welcome travelers from East by thumping the hood of their car.

The Berlin Wall Comes Tumbling Down

