



# November 1989: when the Berlin Wall fell

Peter Main Thu, 05/11/2009 - 11:18

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It is 20 years since the fall of the Berlin wall and the capitalist media is crowing. They say these great events were nothing more than a movement to bring down communism and bring back capitalism. Here, Peter Main shows how the struggle against the Stalinist dictatorship in East Germany in fact began as a struggle against bureaucratic controls and for working class freedoms ? but the crisis of working class leadership meant that the Left handed the initiative to the right wing

It was the visibly weakening power of the Soviet Union that prompted political crises across Eastern Europe in 1989. Attempts by the Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, to revitalise Soviet society by a policy of ?glasnost? (openness) and ?perestroika? (reconstruction) encouraged dissidents and political activists to be more open in their criticism of dictatorial regimes.

At the same time, approval of the brutal massacre of the Democracy Movement in Beijing by Eric Honecker, the East German leader, made clear how high the political stakes were.

As calls for reform became louder in the GDR, both Honecker and the West German leader, Chancellor Helmut Kohl, immediately recognised the importance of the national question. The previous year, Hungary had opened its border to Austria for its own citizens. Now, hundreds of East German ?tourists? tried to reach the West through Hungary. Kohl not only supported their demands but emphasised that they were all entitled to full citizenship in the Federal Republic, and also to Social Security funds. Honecker countered that those who wished to leave the country were ?social parasites and misfits?. It was this which led the growing protest movement to deny any suggestion of disloyalty to the GDR with the slogan ?we?re staying here!?

## September

The first overt call for democratic reforms was published on Monday, 4 September as the ?Appeal for a United Left of the GDR?. This explicitly rejected the idea that democratic reform meant the restoration of capitalism or the dismantling of the state but, equally clearly, restricted itself to reforms within the existing state. The platform said ?the bureaucracy has brought the economy to a dead-end, post-capitalist property relations have to be maintained, only Democratic Socialism based on the rule of workers? councils can realise the potential of the planned economy?.

Also on 4 September, a prayer meeting in Leipzig turned into a demonstration demanding freedom of movement and democratic elections. The local police did not disperse the demonstrators whose numbers quickly grew to several hundred. As news of this spread, the call for ?Monday Demos? was taken up in towns and cities across the country.

On 9 September, a number of well-known dissidents associated with the peace movement published ?Initiative 89?, this proposed the formation of a national political organisation called ?New Forum? committed to democratic reform and ?reshaping? society. When members of New Forum applied to register it with the authorities on September 19, this was rejected on the grounds that they were ?anti-state? and ?disloyal to the people?. This accusation was immediately rebutted by demonstrators across the country who raised banners saying ?We ARE the people!?

## October

Despite official condemnation, political dissent grew. On the first weekend in October, the United Left held their first national conference in Berlin. Two days later, Mikhail Gorbachev, who many saw as a champion of democratisation,

arrived in Berlin for the official celebration of the 40th anniversary of the founding of the GDR. He used his visit to make it clear that there would be no Soviet intervention to maintain the status quo as there had been in Czechoslovakia in 1968.

The visible dismay of Honecker and his cronies was matched only by the jubilation of the crowds. That evening, the first mass protest demonstrations took place in Berlin itself. The crowds on the streets sensed a change in the tide of events; the political revolutionary crisis was reaching its peak. With the threat of Soviet intervention lifted, the issue became whether the regime would turn its own guns on the people. On the following Monday, 9 October, all eyes turned to Leipzig. Would there be another demo? Would it be bigger or smaller? Above all, would the security forces open fire?

In the event, although preparations were made to prevent the demonstration, local commanders allowed it to go ahead and it was bigger than ever with thousands thronging the central square. This was the bursting of the dam. From then on, there was a de facto right to demonstrate, to organise and to hold meetings. Within days, Eric Honecker had resigned as party leader and been replaced by Egon Krenz. In a vain attempt to curry support, he criticised the former leadership and revealed something of its opulent lifestyle.

## **November**

On 7 November, the Cabinet, led by the Prime Minister Willi Stoph, formally resigned. Official demoralisation was made worse by the revelation that over 60% of the membership of the SED had resigned. When the Central Committee met on November 9, it recognised that concessions had to be made and agreed that 'in future' GDR citizens would be allowed to travel to the West. When the official spokesman announced this, it was taken to mean that travel restrictions were lifted immediately and it was this that led to the famous 'Fall of the Wall' as thousands of East Berliners surged to the crossing points and the border guards, now without any effective chain of command, raised the barriers.

The flood of people into West Berlin was heightened by Chancellor Kohl's offer of 100 Deutschmarks as a 'greetings gift' to all GDR citizens. The combined effect was not only to reinforce the image of West Germany as a 'land of plenty' but to undermine even further the legitimacy of the East German regime. Recognising this, the Central Committee of the SED made Hans Modrow the new Prime Minister and gave him the task of forming a coalition government.

Particularly in the South, newly formed political organisations such as Democratic Awakening and Democracy Now were openly calling for the dismantling of the regime, the permanent opening of the border, political pluralism and free elections. Such demands inevitably posed the question of the continued existence of the GDR itself and, from then on, the 'national question' was increasingly the defining issue in the politics of the GDR.

However, for the great majority of the Left, unification could never be anything except a reactionary project. By contrast, at the United Left's 'working conference' on 25 November Workers Power's German sister organisation proposed a programme that linked the struggle for workers' control in the factories and the formation of a workers' militia to the overthrow of the existing DDR state machine, and also recognised that, "it is almost inconceivable that the continued political crisis in the GDR will not see the emergence of unification as a possible solution to economic weakness and instability. Therefore, the demand for the revolutionary reunification of Germany is not a subordinate or merely tactical one but rather a central component of the programme." And it concluded with a call for, "Workers' councils and workers' militia throughout Germany and the convocation of a congress of workers' councils as the organ of state power of the German Workers' Republic! For the revolutionary reunification of Germany!"

Although this programme formed the basis for building a section of our international tendency in the GDR, the rest of the GDR Left totally rejected any demand for national unity, and this ensured that the right wing was unchallenged as the force championing this crucial demand of the people.

## **December**

In early December, to try to restore some popular support, Modrow summoned the leaders of the main opposition

groupings, including the previously banned New Forum that now had 200,000 members, to a Round Table meeting. This adopted his proposal for parliamentary elections on May 6 but also affirmed its loyalty to the GDR. It is a measure of how far politics had already changed that this led to a split in New Forum between its founders and leaders and a rank and file that now called for reunification with the West. On the demonstrations the slogan was now 'We are all ONE people!'

Two events now polarised opinion even further. Helmut Kohl spoke at an election rally in Dresden, promoting an electoral block, the Alliance for Germany, dominated by his own Christian Democrat party. He made it absolutely clear that its strategic aim was reunification, and that this did not mean any kind of parity of status but simply the absorption of East Germany into the existing Federal Republic. This not only invigorated the right wing of the protest movement by giving it a clear goal and the open backing of the Bonn government but also galvanised the left.

## **1990**

On January 3, ostensibly in response to the desecration of Soviet war memorials by neo-Nazis, the government called a demonstration of the left, effectively in defence of the GDR. Modrow's aim was to tie all opponents of capitalist restoration to the maintenance of his own regime. In this, he appeared to be unexpectedly successful. Some 200,000 turned out in the freezing cold and made clear that the pro-Western Alliance was not the only mass force. The size of this demonstration appeared to stabilise the political scene.

However, Modrow misread the situation. Feeling more secure himself, he proposed the formation of a new security force to replace the hated secret police, the Stasi. This proposal electrified society; spontaneously, mass demonstrations took place all over the country. Above all, in Berlin, the masses stormed the Stasi HQ. The polarisation was now complete; a much-reduced left called for 'order', which meant defence of the regime and even, perhaps, of the Stasi. Meanwhile, the right wing, with its equation of reunification with the restoration of capitalism, assumed leadership of the masses on the streets.

The whole situation was now transformed. In effect, the political crisis had been resolved and the right wing was in the ascendant. Modrow now proposed a 'Government of National Responsibility', to include both left and right, and brought forward elections to March 18. Electoral campaigning now took the place of demonstrations; Kohl promised 1:1 exchange of Deutschmarks for Ostmarks and economic union within three months, the governing party, now renamed Party of Democratic Socialism, proposed market reforms to revive the economy within the GDR.

In the election, the Alliance for Germany, dominated by the Christian Democrats, gained the most seats rather than an overall majority but was able to form a coalition with the Social Democrats with the CDU leader, Lothar de Maiziere, as premier. Both wings of this government were committed to the restoration of capitalism and reunification with the West and its establishment marked the end of the GDR as a degenerate workers' state.

Within weeks, on 18 May, Parliament adopted the State Treaty which provided for the abolition of planning, the removal of all controls on capital movement, the introduction of the Deutschmark as the only currency, the imposition of West German labour law and the primacy of the West German Finance Ministry with effect from 2 July, 1990. After that, it was, quite literally, only a matter of formality to complete the dismantling of the GDR and the integration of its territory and people into the Federal Republic on 9 November 1990.

Today, commentators often note the extraordinary speed with which the GDR 'collapsed' and conclude that this proves that reunification on Kohl's terms was always inevitable. It would be more accurate to say that the failure of the left to fight for a revolutionary reunification, linking the call to a struggle to overthrow both the bureaucratic regime in the East and the capitalists in the West, was the final legacy of German Stalinism. What began as a working class movement for political revolution in the GDR, ended as a social counter-revolution and the restoration of capitalism. In this as in all other class battles, the crisis of working class leadership was the key.

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**The GDR and the national question**

It is difficult for some people today to remember that only 20 years ago Germany was still divided into two halves. The division into the Federal Republic in the West and the Democratic Republic in the East was the result of the Soviet occupation of the eastern part of Germany after the Second World War. In 1949, the 'East German' Stalinist dictatorship expropriated what remained of private capital, laying the basis for centralised planning and founded the German Democratic Republic (GDR) on the model of Stalin's USSR. This created what Trotsky called a 'degenerated workers' state', one based on the abolition of capitalism and the establishment of a planned economy, but without working class control over the government and the plan. Although the destruction of capitalism was carried through bureaucratically rather than as the conscious act of the working class, it was now necessary for workers to oppose any restoration of capitalism and defend this state against any attack on it by the western imperialist powers. At the same time it was necessary to fight for a political revolution to smash the Stalinist dictatorship over the workers and replace it with a workers' democracy.

The reunification of Germany continued to be a principled democratic demand, and meant the creation of workers' councils and a revolutionary movement on both sides of the border. In the West it was still necessary to take the main levers of the economy out of the hands of the capitalists, whereas in the East the revolution had to focus on seizing control of the planned economy and breaking Stalinist police rule. This however was never the programme of the majority of the German left. Even in the West, the radical left continued to be heavily influenced by Stalinism and saw any opposition to the East German government and Stalinist regime as automatically pro-capitalist. At the same time, the capitalist Federal Republic claimed to be the legitimate government of the whole of Germany so that, for many, the very idea of reunification could only mean the absorption of the East into the West.

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