THE PEACE MOVEMENT: HOW INFORMAL NETWORKS RESULTED IN THE COLLAPSE OF THE GDR & THE CHURCH’S INVOLVEMENT

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WHAT IS THE BERLIN WALL?

• Border between East and West Germany
• After World War II German territories split into four “allied occupation zones”
• West Germany: Democratic Republic
  – Occupied by British, American and French sectors
• East Germany
  – Controlled by the German Democratic Republic (Soviet Union)
• Berlin also separated this way although it was in East Germany
• Joint occupation began in 1945
WHY WAS THE WALL BUILT?

• Between 1945 and 1961 almost 3 million refugees fled from East to West Germany
  – Most were young, educated workers
• July 1961 over 30,000 fled
• August 12 more than 2,400 people fled
  – Largest number recorded in one day
  – Later that day Premier Khrushchev gave orders to the GDR to close the border
• Two weeks later a barbed wire and concrete fence was built
• After this it was impossible to travel from East to West Germany without passing through checkpoints
• Families and friends were separated, jobs were lost

THE WALL AND ITS BEGINNING

• The Wall was steadily made more durable
• Between the borders was the “Death Strip”– an area where GDR officials could patrol for and shoot escapees
• Some tried to escape immediately
• Ida Siekmann was the first death in attempted escape
  – Lived on a road that ran along the border
  – Jumped out of her window but died on impact
ANALYSIS OF THE PEACE MOVEMENT AND MONDAY DEMONSTRATIONS

• No challenge to GDR for decades, then in the span of a few months the regime was toppled
• The Monday Demonstrations have been cited as “an example of a revolutionary upheaval that defied the predictive power of general theory” (Pfaff 94)
• Most East German publically agreed with GDR politics excluding a small number of groups of religious and intellectual circles (early roots of the Peace Movement)
• Social and informal networks crucial to mobilization
  – Similar to Ella Baker’s “group-centered leadership”– no central figurehead
• State made organizations and political groups outside of the control of the GDR almost impossible
  – Informal groups and tightly knit networks became the way that dissenters formed a collective identity

ANALYSIS OF THE PEACE MOVEMENT AND MONDAY DEMONSTRATIONS (CON’T)

• Informal groups began to disperse information to East Germans regarding the opposition movement
  – The opposition movement was not reported in any kind of media
• As the demonstrations were at the same time each week organization of the people was relatively simple
• The church provided a safe place for dissenters to gather, discuss and protest
• Shared political frames resulting in rapid mobilization of the people
  – Dissatisfaction with the government
  – Misalignment of what the GDR stood for and how it actually functioned
  – Desire for peace
  – Collective Identity framed by chants “We are the people” representing desire for a government that involved the citizens
THE CHURCH & STATE

• Evangelical Church faced hostility from the GDR since its foundation
• Communist party functioned as an atheist regime
• Some Christians even prohibited from attending college
• In 1978, “Wehrkunde” (military science) introduced to teenage boys
  – Taught opposition to the Evangelical church
• Church argued that the subject was not relevant to curriculum
• Incongruity between church and state pivotal to the start of the Peace Movement in the GDR

THE BEGINNINGS OF THE PEACE MOVEMENT

• Pastor Rainer Eppelmann was a significant activist in the Peace Movement
• Wrote Berlin Appeal in 1982 which called for withdrawal of troops in East and West Germany
• Organized many peace workshops, and “peace weeks” each November
  – Involved religious services, discussion and poetry readings
• Church was autonomous from the state and had right to organize meetings
  – Individuals who disagreed with the state were welcomed by the church
• The Nikolaikirche (St. Nicholas Church) in Leipzig and the Gethsemanekirche (Gethsemane Church) in Berlin were very significant in organizing
  – Eventually leading to peaceful revolution of 1989
THE CHURCH’S MOBILIZATION OF PEOPLE

• Christian Führer was the pastor of St. Nicholas Church in Leipzig from 1980 to 2008
• In 1982, Führer began weekly “prayers for peace”, occurring every Monday for almost a decade
  – Meetings were open to nonreligious people
• Führer saw the meetings as an opportunity to spread peace as well as his message to individuals who had been raised in an atheist regime

“The special experience that we had during the years of peace prayers and then with this massive number of non-Christians in the church, which was exceptional, was that they accepted the message of Jesus.”

- Christian Führer in an interview with Religion & Ethics Newsweekly

THE CHURCH’S MOBILIZATION OF THE PEOPLE (CON’T)

• Some weeks less than a dozen people would participate in the meetings
• GDR discouraged its citizens involvement in any religious activities the meetings were not disrupted
• In 1965, Führer placed a sign outside of the church that read “open to all”
  – As one of the only locations where individuals could express their political opinions, this was very significant
• A wide range of topics were discussed, from the environment to the right to travel
• As the word of the Monday meetings spread, attendance increased.
• Weekly peace prayers became the largest regular meetings held in the GDR
• Meetings became increasingly political, opposition groups began to attend meetings
THE START OF THE PEACE PROTESTS

• In 1988, inspired by pro-democracy sentiment, further organizers and protestors came out in opposition to the government
• On January 17, 1988, a yearly memorial march to honor two Marxist revolutionaries turned into a protest fighting for human rights and democracy
  – More than 100 people were arrested for radical behavior
• For the next year, other small-scale protests took place, but none raised any real concern from the government

ELECTIONS OF 1989

• Pivotal time for citizen’s growing dissatisfaction with the government
• People’s voting was simply a formality, as a pre-determined ticket was announced each year
• Individuals who neglected to vote received reminders from the Stasi (the secret police)
• Activists handed out flyers urging citizens to “vote no” and boycott the elections entirely
  – Around 100,000 openly committed to do this
• Party officials later announced that 98.5% of the people had voted on the Socialist ticket
  – Obvious that the election was not transparent and the results had been manipulated to benefit the state
THE MONDAY DEMONSTRATIONS

• September 4, 1989, following a prayer meeting at St. Nicholas Church, people began to hold rallies protesting the GDR
  — Rallies began to follow the prayers every week
• The protestors were instilled with the confidence that the Lutheran Church supported their views and would provide as much protection as possible
• Once the weekly demonstrations began, attendance grew further
  — Movement became steadily more organized, quickly gaining traction and publicity
• Activists around the country began to organize their own rallies which were collectively known as the “Monday Demonstrations”

THE MONDAY DEMONSTRATIONS (CON’T)

• For many years, the prayer meetings had been ignored by the government
• As the movement expanded across the country and quickly gained numbers, the church and the people were pressured to stop the meetings
THE SUCCESSIVE GROWTH OF THE DEMONSTRATIONS

- October 9- Over 70,000 people joined demonstration in Leipzig
  - Large preparation for this demonstration
  - Hospitals stocked with extra blood and beds
  - Four other Leipzig churches accommodated protesters
  - Hour long service led by Führer
  - Participants held candles
  - Prominent citizens read appeals to protestors and police, urging them to keep the peace
  - Walked past Stasi headquarters, toward train station
  - Chant: Wir sind das Volk! ("We are the people!") representing desire for a Democratic Republic
  - Only a few arrested, retreat of forces due to sheer number of demonstrators
  - No violent action taken against protestors

OCTOBER 9 DEMONSTRATION IN LEIPZIG

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XPPHTjULzFE
THE SUCCESSIVE GROWTH OF THE DEMONSTRATIONS (CON’T)

- October 16- over 120,000 protestors
- October 23- over 320,000 protestors
- November 4- over 500,000 (held in East Berlin)
  - Called “Alexanderplatz demonstrations”
  - Largest GDR demonstration
  - Civil rights campaigners gave speeches
  - Called for a “Revolution from Below”
  - Authorities did not intervene

THE END OF THE WALL

- November 9 at 7 pm it was announced at a press conference that East Germans could travel to West Germany with a passport
  - Günter Schabowski made the mistake of saying that this would be effective immediately
- In a few hours thousands had gathered at checkpoints intending to pass through
- At first the crowds were restrained but at 11:30 pm the people were allowed to pass through
NOV. 10, 1989: CELEBRATION AT THE BERLIN WALL

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