

THE MIXED EMOTIONS OF NOVEMBER 9TH



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In Germany, November 9th is a day of very mixed emotions.

In 1923, this was the date on which the “Beer Hall Putsch” took place, a failed violent coup led by Hitler and the Nazis to overthrow the Weimar government. The following April, Hitler was convicted of high treason and sentenced to five years in prison (the bare minimum sentence). While in prison, Hitler was given various privileges, and he wrote the first volume of *Mein Kampf*. By the end of the year, Hitler was released, and he pivoted the Nazi party to seek power via legitimate means. Ten years later, Hitler had become the Chancellor of Germany.

Fifteen years to the day after the Beer Hall Putsch, in 1938, came Kristallnacht, the Night of Broken Glass. On that night, the German authorities stood by as Hitler’s Storm Troopers and members of the Hitler Youth stormed Jewish businesses and buildings, synagogues and schools, hospitals and homes, breaking their windows and ransacking the property. While the Nazis claimed the violence was a spontaneous

reaction to the murder of a Nazi official, it was instead a well-planned attack, thousands of Jews were rounded up and sent to concentration camps, and the Nazis demanded the Jewish community pay a huge "Atonement Tax" of 1 billion Reichsmarks, and any insurance payouts to Jews were seized by the government.

As bad as those memories are for Germany, an entirely different memory of November 9th was created in 1989, when after a tumultuous summer, the Berlin Wall came down. JD Bindenagel was the career State Department officer serving as the deputy chief of mission at the US mission in East Germany's capital of Berlin, and he described it like this in 2019:

On Nov. 9, 1989, there was no sign of revolution. Sure, change was coming—but slowly, we thought. After all, the Solidarity movement in Poland began in the early 1980s. I spent the afternoon at an Aspen Institute reception hosted by David Anderson for his new deputy director, Hildegard Boucsein, with leaders from East and West Berlin, absorbed in our day-to-day business. In the early evening, I attended a reception along with the mayors and many political leaders of East and West Berlin, Allied military commanders and East German lawyer Wolfgang Vogel. Not one of us had any inkling of the events that were about to turn the world upside down.

As the event was ending, Wolfgang Vogel asked me for a ride. I was happy to oblige and hoped to discuss changes to the GDR travel law, the target of the countrywide demonstrations for freedom. On the way, he told me that the Politburo planned to reform the travel law and that the communist leadership had met that day to adopt new rules to satisfy East Germans' demand for more freedom of travel. I dropped Vogel off

at his golden-colored Mercedes near West Berlin's shopping boulevard, Ku'Damm. Happy about my scoop on the Politburo deliberations, I headed to the embassy. Vogel's comments would surely make for an exciting report back to the State Department in Washington.

I arrived at the embassy at 7:30 p.m. and went directly to our political section, where I found an animated team of diplomats. At a televised press conference, government spokesman Guenter Schabowski had just announced the Politburo decision to lift travel restrictions, leaving everyone at the embassy stunned. East Germans could now get visitor visas from their local "People's Police" station, and the East German government would open a new processing center for emigration cases. When an Italian journalist asked the spokesman when the new rules would go into effect, Schabowski fumbled with his papers, unsure—and then mumbled: "Unverzueglich" (immediately). With that, my Vogel scoop evaporated.

At this point, excitement filled the embassy. None of us had the official text of the statement or knew how East Germans planned to implement the new rules. Although Schabowski's declaration was astounding, it was open to widely varying interpretations. Still dazed by the announcement, we anticipated the rebroadcast an hour later.

At 8 p.m., Political Counselor Jon Greenwald and I watched as West Germany's news program "Tagesschau" led with the story. By then, political officer Imre Lipping had picked up the official statement and returned to the embassy to report to Washington. Heather Troutman, another political officer, wrote an on-the-ground report that the

guards at Checkpoint Charlie were telling East Germans to get visas. Greenwald cabled the text of Schabowski's announcement to Washington: East Germans had won the freedom to travel and emigrate.

As the cable arrived in Washington, I called the White House Situation Room and State Department Operations Center to discuss the report and alert them to the latest developments. I then called Harry Gilmore, the American minister in West Berlin.

"Harry," I said, "it looks like you're going to have a lot of visitors soon. We're just not sure yet what that rush of visitors will look like."

We assumed that, at best, East Germans would start crossing into West Berlin the next day. In those first moments, the wall remained impassable. After all, these were Germans; they were known for following the rules. Schabowski had announced the visa rules, and we believed there would be an orderly process. East Germans, however, were following West German television coverage, as well. And, as it turned out, they decided to hold their government to its word immediately.

I headed home around 10 p.m. to watch events unfold on West German television. On my way to Pankow, I was surprised by the unusual amount of traffic. The "Trabi," with its two-cycle engine and a body made of plasticized pressed-wood, spewing gas and oil smoke, was always in short supply. Perhaps one of the most striking symbols of East Germany's economy, those iconic cars now filled the streets despite the late hour—and they were headed to the Bornholmer Strasse checkpoint. Near the checkpoint, drivers were abandoning them left and

right.

Ahead of me, the blazing lights of a West German television crew led by *Der Spiegel* reporter Georg Mascolo illuminated the checkpoint. The TV crew, safely ensconced in the West, was preparing for a live broadcast. Despite the bright lights, all I could make out was a steadily growing number of demonstrators gathering at the checkpoint. From the tumult, I could faintly hear yells of "Tor auf!" (Open the gate!) Anxious East Germans had started confronting the East German border guards. Inside the crossing, armed border police waited for instructions.

Amid a massive movement of people, fed by live TV, the revolution that had started so slowly was rapidly spinning out of control. The question running through my mind was whether the Soviet Army would stay in its barracks. There were 380,000 Soviet soldiers in East Germany. In diplomatic circles, we expected that the Soviet Union, the military superpower, would not give up East Germany without a fight. Our role was to worry—the constant *modus operandi* of a diplomat. But this time, our concern didn't last long.

When I arrived home around 10:15 p.m., I turned on the TV, called the State Department with the latest developments, and called Ambassador Richard Barkley and then Harry Gilmore again: "Remember I told you that you'd be seeing lots of visitors?" I said. "Well, that might be tonight."

Just minutes later, I witnessed on live television as a wave of East Berliners broke through the checkpoint at Bornholmer Strasse, where I had been just minutes earlier. My wife, Jean,

joined me, and we watched a stream of people crossing the bridge while TV cameras transmitted their pictures around the world. Lights came on in the neighborhood. I was elated. East Germans had made their point clear. After 40 years of Cold War, East Berliners were determined to have freedom.

Bindenagel was elated, the German people were elated (Bindenagel gave more detail in a video interview [here](#), and Deutsche Welle has a host of anniversary articles and interviews [here](#)), and the West (broadly speaking) was elated.

A certain KGB agent stationed in East Germany and assigned to work with the Stasi (the East German Secret Police) was most certainly not elated, and grew increasingly frustrated in the weeks that followed. The BBC described the agent's reaction like this:

It is 5 December 1989 in Dresden, a few weeks after the Berlin Wall has fallen. East German communism is dying on its feet, people power seems irresistible.

Crowds storm the Dresden headquarters of the Stasi, the East German secret police, who suddenly seem helpless.

Then a small group of demonstrators decides to head across the road, to a large house that is the local headquarters of the Soviet secret service, the KGB.

"The guard on the gate immediately rushed back into the house," recalls one of the group, Siegfried Dannath. But shortly afterwards "an officer emerged – quite small, agitated".

"He said to our group, 'Don't try to force your way into this property. My comrades are armed, and they're authorised to use their weapons in an emergency.'"

That persuaded the group to withdraw.

But the KGB officer knew how dangerous the situation remained. He described later how he rang the headquarters of a Red Army tank unit to ask for protection.

The answer he received was a devastating, life-changing shock.

"We cannot do anything without orders from Moscow," the voice at the other end replied. "And Moscow is silent."

That phrase, "Moscow is silent" has haunted this man ever since. Defiant yet helpless as the 1989 revolution swept over him, he has now himself become "Moscow" – the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin.

For Putin, this was the beginning of the fall of the great Russian empire, and everything Putin has done since has been an effort to restore the greatness of Great Mother Russia, with himself as her leader and savior.

On this November 9th, it is the Germans and West who are worried and Putin who is elated, as Donald Trump prepares to take office. Putin dreams of an end to US military support for Ukraine, a diminished US role in NATO (if not a complete withdrawal from the alliance), and a weakening of the Five Eyes intelligence sharing agreement between the US and the UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

On this November 9th, Putin's dreams are looking closer to becoming a reality.

On this November 9th, Moscow is no longer silent.