



The Collapse: The Accidental Opening of the Berlin Wall

Mary Elise Sarotte

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The Berlin Wall was erected in 1961 to end all traffic between the city's two halves: the democratic west and the communist east. The iconic symbol of a divided Europe, the Wall became a focus of western political pressure on East Germany; as Ronald Reagan's famously said in a 1987 speech in Berlin, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" But as award-winning historian Mary Sarotte shows in *[Title TK]*, the opening of the Wall on November 9, 1989 was not, as is commonly believed, the East German government's deliberate concession to outside influence. It was an accident. A carelessly worded memo written by mid-level bureaucrats, a bumbling press conference given by an inept member of the East German Politburo, the negligence of government leaders, the bravery of ordinary people in East and West Berlin—these combined to bring about the end of nearly forty years of oppression, fear, and enmity in divided Berlin. When the news broke, Washington and Moscow could only stand by and watch as Tom Brokaw and other journalists narrated the televised broadcast of this critical moment in the thawing of the cold war.

Sarotte opens her story in the months leading up to that fateful day. Following East German dissidents, she shows how their efforts coalesced around opposition to the regime's restrictions on foreign travel. The city of Leipzig, close to the border with Czechoslovakia, became a hothouse of activism, and protests there quickly grew into massive demonstrations. The East German Politburo hoped to limit its citizens' knowledge of these marches, but two daring dissidents, East Berliners Aram Radomski and Siegbert Schefke, managed to evade the Stasi and film the largest of them from a church tower. They then smuggled their tape to West Germany; broadcast in both nations, the footage galvanized activists across East Germany, and precipitated the stunning developments on November 9.

Facing mounting pressure from its own citizens, the East German Politburo planned to put off enacting any meaningful change to its travel policy by issuing a deceptive ruling that would appear to offer more freedom, but which in fact would allow the state to maintain strict control over its citizen's movements. But the bureaucrats tasked with preparing the "new" regulations misunderstood their task, and instead drafted a declaration that said East Germans could freely leave the country. This declaration ended up in the hands of regime spokesman Günter Schabowski, who announced the rules at a press conference without understanding their import. Stunned reporters were soon broadcasting the news around the world. Crowds of East Germans began streaming to the Wall, prompting a showdown with border guards, who received no support or direction from East German leadership as the throngs multiplied. By 11:30, Harald Jäger, a second-tier passport control officer, had had enough and finally opened the wall to the mob gathering outside his gate. Even though East German forces successfully regained control by the morning, it was too late—for the wall, for the regime, and for Communism in Eastern Europe.

Drawing on evidence from archives in multiple countries and languages, along with dozens of interviews with key actors, including Harald Jäger, *[Title TK]* is the definitive account of the event that brought down the East German Politburo and came to represent the final collapse of the Cold War order.

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