

Exhibition Concept “Revolution and the Fall of the Wall”

Open-Air Exhibition in the Stasi Headquarters in Berlin-Lichtenberg

The Exhibition

The exhibition deals with the causes, background and course of the Peaceful Revolution as well as the complex motives of those involved. The formerly divided city of Berlin provides the ideal conditions for illustrating the German-German aspects and the power bloc confrontation of its postwar history. Since the revolution did not end with the fall of the Berlin Wall, a good third of the exhibition recalls the period from November 1989 onwards, narrates the events up until the free elections in March 1990 and describes the exciting road towards German unity and, moreover, to the first all-German elections in December 1990.

The exhibition focuses on East Germans who overcame their fear and took their fate into their own hands. They compelled politicians to act and ‘made history’. Oppositional activities are shown which – initiated by small groups of people – soon grew into larger movements, as well as the activities of the new grassroots movements and parties, the courageous demonstrations and the helpless reactions of the communist authorities.

Many people voted with their feet and left the country while others wanted to reform the GDR. Together, they toppled the Socialist Unity Party (SED) dictatorship. An increasing number of people took a stand against hopelessness, decline and stagnation in society, demanding freedom of travel and free elections. Just how rapidly events progressed can be seen from the fact that, in the local elections in May 1989, around 90 percent of people still voted for the government-backed candidate list on the GDR ballot paper and, only six months later, hundreds of thousands took to the streets and called into question the SED’s claim to power. Then, just under six months after this, the first free elections in the GDR were held.

The majorities among the demonstrators also changed rapidly, most noticeably with the shift in the slogans from “We are the people” to “We are one people”. Even the fall of the Wall did nothing to stem the tide of East Germans leaving the country for the West. Most voters chose to support the CDU and SPD, who promised the fastest route to reunification. Again, the speed was determined by the people, who pushed the government to agree to the monetary union and unity, and forced through an amendment a few days before the Unification Treaty came into effect, to include disclosure of the Stasi files. Not only does the exhibition reproduce the chronology of events of the social restructuring and reform but it also shows the complexity of the process of political decision-making – with completely conflicting interests at times – the goals of the East German people, their motives and methods, such as self-organisation and non-violence.

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The exhibition also considers that the courage to act did not come from nowhere, that there were causes and conditions and that effects were felt from neighbouring countries, be they signals from Poland's Solidarność movement or family ties with Germans on the other side of the Wall. The West German media also undoubtedly played a pivotal role in the revolution.

Structure

The exhibition is divided into three sections: "Awakening", "Revolution" and "Unity". The "Awakening" section deals with the events immediately preceding the revolution, from around 1985 to summer 1989. The "Revolution" section covers the period between summer 1989 and the evening before the GDR parliamentary elections on 18 March 1990. The critical phase of the revolution for freedom was then over, and the "Unity" section focuses on the further democratisation of the East German society and the short remaining road to German unity.

Most of the content is available at www.revolution89.de:

Awakening <http://revolution89.de/aufbruch/gegen-die-diktatur/>

Revolution <http://revolution89.de/revolution/immer-mehr-wollen-raus/>

Unity <http://revolution89.de/einheit/keine-experimente/>

Realisation of the Exhibition

Over 292 linear metres, the exhibition tells the story of the events of the revolution. It is a visual presentation of the various facets of the social upheaval of 1989 and the road to German unity with a particular focus on Berlin and the historical site of the Stasi headquarters. The exhibition is in the open air, accessible around the clock, and admission is free.

It is a continuation of the open-air exhibition on the Peaceful Revolution which, as a temporary memorial on Alexanderplatz in 2009, was one of the highlights of the anniversary at the time. The permanent exposition follows the basic structure of the concept of the original content and large sections of the exhibition texts and their English translations have been used again, as have the nine media stations. Texts, captions, photos and documents have been critically reviewed, and some of them replaced, updated and expanded. Moreover, new exhibition modules are being prepared, 'eye witness islands', on which dialogues in the voices of eye witnesses can be called up by smartphone. For "Revolution and the Fall of the Wall", there is a new audio guide in German and English, with other languages in the pipeline, as well as an audio guide for children. Audio guide equipment is available on loan from the information desk in the complex.

The exhibition architecture and design, appropriately selected exhibits, the font size and suitable signposting ensure visitors are able to find their way around easily and give them barrier-free access to the exhibition. Audio guides also enable the visually impaired to enjoy an interesting tour of the exhibition.

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As academic advisors, Prof Gisela Grosse and Dr Jens Schöne were available to assist the exhibition team. Both were also on the advisory board for the 2009 exhibition.

Accompanying Activities

An information point in House 22 is open eight hours a day. This is where exhibition visitors will find sanitary facilities, expert contact people, publications and other materials on the subject of the exhibition, and where they can hire audio guide devices, book tours with eye witnesses or note their impressions in the guest book.

A bilingual magazine is being compiled as a companion catalogue. The website in six languages (English, German, Spanish, French, Russian and Turkish) has undergone a technical, creative and editorial overhaul. In addition to the complete exhibition content, it provides supplementary multimedia materials, further information and an exhibition blog. The exhibition is also represented on social media (Facebook and Twitter).

The exhibition is run in close cooperation with the Federal Commissioner for the Stasi Records (BstU) and Anti-Stalinist Action Normannenstraße (ASTAK) and draws on the potential of both these institutions.

The Historical Site

In the course of the revolution, demonstrators occupied offices of the Ministry of State Security (MfS) throughout the entire GDR from 4 December 1989 onwards. This was triggered by obvious signs that the ministry was destroying its files. Initially, however, the headquarters of the ministry in East Berlin remained unaffected. Unlike all its subordinate offices, this was able to continue to work unimpeded up until January 1990. It was only on 15 January 1990 that thousands forced their way into the Berlin Stasi headquarters in the East Berlin borough of Lichtenberg and seized a crucial power base of the SED. The disputes surrounding the Stasi were a key aspect of the power struggle during the revolution for freedom in the GDR.

After the fall of the Wall, the SED still had its massive power structure and enormous financial and technical resources. Since the end of November 1989, Hans Modrow had been prime minister of the GDR; the SED still occupied the majority of positions in his cabinet. A few days later, the Central Round Table met for the first time. This was initiated by members of the opposition groups who wanted to enter into negotiations with the ruling party. One of the most important decisions made by the Round Table was the complete dissolution of the state security, which contradicted one of the first things Modrow did when he took up office: renaming the Ministry of State Security the Office for National Security (AfNS) and announcing it would be downsized, so as to preserve the secret police. In mid-December, the Council of Ministers under Modrow began a new attempt to save the structures of the old secret police by founding two new secret services.

The attempt by Modrow's government to establish the state security under the new guises of protection of the constitution and foreign secret service was vehemently rejected by the people. Representatives of the newly founded movements and parties gave Hans Modrow an ultimatum on 8 January 1990. He was pressed to answer to the Central Round Table and give up his proposal. The people increased the pressure through demonstrations and

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strikes. On 11 January, for instance, construction workers outside the People's Chamber demanded the complete dissolution of the Ministry of State Security and the Office for National Security, and taxi drivers did the same a day later. Finally, demonstrators stormed the Stasi headquarters in Berlin-Lichtenberg on 15 January 1990. Hans Modrow immediately rushed to the scene and made a conciliatory attempt to intervene. The headquarters were still occupied and so the last stronghold of the SED fell.

As a result, Modrow gave up his endeavours and offered the opposition grassroots movements and parties the option of having representatives in the government. Following difficult negotiations, eight ministers were appointed to the 'government of national responsibility' on 5 February 1990.

As had already happened in many larger cities in December, a citizens' committee was now also established in Berlin. The committees emerged spontaneously from among those occupying the Stasi buildings and attempted not to trust the dissolution of the secret service to the organisation itself, but to subject the process of dissolution to a certain level of public control. The committees tracked down hundreds of secret Stasi bases, switched off telephone and bugging systems and, most importantly, secured the files.

The Berlin citizens' committee began work on 16 January 1990 and inspected the bags of secret police employees who were still active. Most Stasi officers were dismissed over the next few days, while others stopped work of their own accord. Following a decision taken by the Central Round Table's working group on security on 23 February 1990, the Main Directorate for Reconnaissance, the Stasi's foreign intelligence service, was allowed to wind up its activities without supervision. It was only later that it transpired that they were not only spying abroad but had also been monitoring the opposition groups in the GDR. Moreover, the 'State Committee for the Dissolution of the Former MfS/AfNS' appointed by Modrow's government was also operating on the premises of the Ministry of State Security in Berlin-Lichtenberg, a body subsequently controlled by the GDR's Minister of the Interior Peter-Michael Diestel. The name of this committee was intended to give the impression that it had been established to continue the work of the citizens' committees. This was not the case at all. In fact, the state committee, the majority of whose members were former full-time employees of the ministry, obstructed the citizens' committees' work. This led the grassroots movement and most East Germans to doubt the politicians' serious intention to dissolve the ministry. The citizens' committees fought to be able to continue dissolving the Stasi.

From spring 1990, the media were constantly releasing new reports about crimes committed by the state security. Time and again, informers in responsible positions were exposed. Members of the Erfurt citizens' committee found evidence that several candidates for the first free and democratic parliamentary elections in March 1990 had previously been informers for the secret police. Consequently, they demanded checks to be carried out on all elected representatives in the People's Chamber. But these checks threatened to fail. Following this, in March 1990, the New Forum and other civil rights movements called for protest rallies throughout the country. In Berlin, around 50,000 people assembled on 29 March.

After the parliamentary elections, Minister of the Interior Peter-Michael Diestel restricted the influence of the citizens' committees. He unceremoniously blocked their access to the archive and gave the committee members their notice as of the end of June 1990.

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In June, a People's Chamber special committee was appointed to dissolve the Ministry of State Security under the leadership of Joachim Gauck. Control of the Stasi dissolution was transferred to the parliamentarians.

A self-appointed GDR government committee and the People's Chamber special committee drafted a law to deal with the Stasi files. This stipulated that the files should not be destroyed and were to be made accessible to each citizen concerned. This law, passed in August following fierce debate, was not incorporated into the Unification Treaty, however, since the West German government wanted to keep the files closed.

Consequently, civil rights activists occupied the archive of the former Ministry of State Security in Berlin-Lichtenberg on 4 September 1990. They demanded that victims of the SED dictatorship be given access to their Stasi files and that the retention and further use of these documents be clearly regulated in the Unification Treaty. A vigil drew public attention to the occupiers of the archive. The well-attended daily rallies showed that the occupiers were speaking to many East Germans from the heart. They discovered that they could not expect any open and honest confrontation of the past from many of the new freely and democratically elected people's representatives. During the People's Chamber session on 28 September 1990, there were fierce disputes among the representatives about how to deal with the Stasi files. They argued heatedly for hours about whether or not and how the names of the representatives with a Stasi background should be made known. This was vehemently demanded by the parliamentary groups of the newly founded SPD and Alliance 90 but firmly rejected by CDU representatives originating from the earlier bloc parties.

More than a few East Germans were afraid they would continue to be pawns in the hands of the secret services if these were the only people to have access to the Stasi files. Nor could they bear the thought that West German government agencies would be able to use these files without those who had been spied on knowing their content.

Through their massive protests, the occupiers of the archive in Lichtenberg, together with the civil rights activists in the People's Chamber and with widespread support from the population, reached a settlement in compliance with the People's Chamber law. The protests in September 1990 finally forced the files of a secret police service to be opened for the first time. In today's reunified Germany, access to the Ministry of State Security's documents is regulated by law.

Intention and Relevance of the Exhibition

Today, the fall of the Berlin Wall on the evening of 9 November 1989, one of the highlights of the Peaceful Revolution, is the best-known symbol of the end of the SED dictatorship and the demise of communism. The revolution for freedom shows that dictatorships can be overcome; the fall of the Wall is viewed globally as a symbol of achieving freedom. For many people, this brings hope that their own country may be fortunate enough to see a similar development. In the permanent exhibition, attention is explicitly drawn to the peaceful and successful course of a revolution with democratic aims – not something that can be taken for granted in this day and age.

The Robert Havemann Society's open-air exhibition is at the site where the SED's crucial power base, its "shield and sword", was finally wrested from its hands. This makes it the

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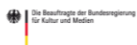


perfect complement to the new permanent exhibition in the Stasi museum. In House 1, visitors can see how the persecution and oppression of dissidents was planned and implemented. In the courtyard in front of the building, the story of the defeat of the communist dictatorship is told.

The seat of power and nerve centre of the SED dictatorship was in East Berlin. When East Germans stormed one of the last bastions of the SED regime in Berlin-Lichtenberg on 15 January 1990, they turned the site into one of the most important scenes of the revolution. Consequently, this historical site is a symbol both of the dictatorship in the GDR and of overcoming it, and thus uniquely suitable for an exhibition on the fight for freedom, the shaping of democracy and the road to German unity. People here also played a role in the Unification Treaty when civil rights activists occupied the Stasi file archive in September 1990 and forced the opening of the files. To this day, many public and controversial debates on the handling of history take place at this site.

The exhibition “Revolution and the Fall of the Wall” will make a major contribution towards developing the former Stasi headquarters into a site for shedding light on dictatorship and resistance. The subject of the exhibition is perfect for imparting, at an authentic site, positive experiences of German democratic history to young people with no experience of dictatorship of their own, thus enhancing their awareness of freedom, justice and democracy.

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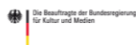
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