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Civil Society and the Paralyzed State: Mobilizing for Democracy in East Germany

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Mobilizing for Democracy: Democratization Processes and the Mobilization of Civil Society

The project addresses the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) in democratization processes, bridging social science approaches to social movements and democracy. The project starts by revisiting the “transitology” approach to democratization and the political process approach to social movements, before moving towards more innovative approaches in both areas. From the theoretical point of view, a main innovation will be in addressing both structural preconditions as well as actors’ strategies, looking at the intersection of structure and agency. In an historical and comparative perspective, I aim to develop a description and an understanding of the conditions and effects of the participation of civil society organizations in the various stages of democratization processes. Different parts of the research will address different sub-questions linked to the broad question of CSOs’ participation in democratization processes: a) under which (external and internal) conditions and through which mechanisms do CSOs support democratization processes? b) Under which conditions and through which mechanisms do they play an important role in democratization processes? c) Under which conditions and through which mechanisms are they successful in triggering democratization processes? d) And, finally, what is the legacy of the participation of civil society during transitions to democracy on the quality of democracy during consolidation? The main empirical focus will be on recent democratization processes in EU member and associated states. The comparative research design will, however, also include selected comparisons with oppositional social movements in authoritarian regimes as well as democratization processes in other historical times and geopolitical regions. From an empirical point of view, a main innovation will lie in the development of mixed method strategies, combining large N and small N analyses, and qualitative comparative analysis with in-depth, structured narratives.

Civil Society and the Paralyzed State: Mobilizing for Democracy in East Germany

Daniel P. Ritter

Cosmos Working Paper 2012/6

Abstract: Among cases of transition to democracy from below, the East German one constitutes a particularly challenging puzzle. Whereas social movements taking advantage of an oppositional space within a repressive context have preceded many transitions, the East German case shows little evidence of such large-scale prior opposition. Even when compared to other Eastern European transitions, East Germany is unique in that no major opposition group existed prior to the revolution. Still, civil society groups did play important roles in East Germany in the 1980s. Despite being unable to challenge the regime, they began to create the political space necessary for a protest culture to emerge. In fact, the development of civil society groups assumed an almost evolutionary character as religious groups gave way for peace and environmental movements that eventually transformed in turn into democratization initiatives. This report seeks to highlight some of the most important civil society tendencies present in the GDR and to situate them in the domestic and international contexts that made a mass-based push for democratization possible in the fall of 1989. Furthermore, the report argues that the relative lack of coherent civil society organizations makes the East German transition to democracy a pure example of democratization from below, as opposition elites had little impact on the progression of the revolution.

Key words: Democratization; Transition; German Democratic Republic; Civil society; 1989

“The revolution in the GDR is so fascinating because it both occurred spontaneously and ensued nonviolently.” (Opp, Voss, and Gem 1995: 225)

Among cases of transition to democracy from below, the East German example constitutes a particularly challenging puzzle. Whereas social movements taking advantage of oppositional space within a repressive context have preceded many transitions, the East German case of the fall of 1989 shows little evidence of such large-scale prior opposition. Even when compared to other Eastern European transitions, East Germany is unique in that no major opposition group existed prior to the revolution. In Poland and Czechoslovakia, Solidarity and Charter 77 came to symbolize inextinguishable pockets of

opposition. While the latter was relatively easily controlled by the Czechoslovakian government in its first decade of existence, it still served as a powerful example of opposition to the regime. In the GDR, opposition was arguably even weaker and more fragmented. Peace and environmental movements existed in the decade leading up to the transition, but few democratization initiatives emerged before Gorbachev proclaimed his reform program in 1985. Even when such civil society groups did form in the second half of the decade they remained largely unknown and inconsequential.

Still, civil society groups played important roles in the 1980s. Despite being unable to challenge the regime, they began to create the political space necessary for a protest culture to emerge. In fact, the development of civil society groups assumed an almost evolutionary character as religious groups gave way to peace and environmental movements that were eventually transformed into democratization initiatives. This report seeks to highlight some of the most important civil society tendencies present in the GDR and to situate them in the domestic and international contexts that made a mass-based push for democratization possible in the fall of 1989. Furthermore, the report argues that the relative lack of coherent civil society organizations makes the East German transition to democracy a pure example of democratization from below, since opposition elites had little impact on the progression of the revolution.

Periodization

At first sight the democratization of East Germany appears to have been a very short process. The first major protests against the ruling SED (the Socialist Unity Party of Germany or Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands) occurred as late as September 1989. Two months later, the checkpoints in the Wall that had served to keep the citizens of the GDR (German Democratic Republic) from escaping to the West had been opened and the Wall itself was being torn down by euphoric Germans from both sides of Berlin. Less than a year after that, on October 3, 1990, the two Germanies reunited, and on December 2 the resurrected nation held its first all-German elections since 1932 (König 1993; Nepstad 2011; Stokes 1993). It is thus tempting to argue, as some scholars have (König 1993: 386), that the democratization of the GDR was in effect roughly a 12-month process. However, to accept this point of view is to overlook some important historical developments that significantly impacted the democratization process. In this section I will highlight the important landmarks that should arguably be included in any discussion of East Germany's democratization. In doing so, I suggest that the country's democratization from below began as early as 1953.

The popular uprising of 1953 constitutes one of the earliest upheavals in the communist bloc, and precedes both the Hungarian and Czechoslovakian

popular challenges against communist regimes in 1956 and 1968. When the SED gained control of the state in 1949, USSR-imposed communism had already begun to take its toll on the economy, which struggled in the face of reparations and other war related expenses. By 1952, living standards in the new country had fallen below those of 1947, and when Moscow refused to lend Berlin a helping hand in solving its economic problems in January 1952, things predictably took a turn for the worse. The situation deteriorated further in April of that year, when the Council of Ministers announced a number of price hikes and the discontinuation of food subsidies for two million “non-essential” workers (Stibbe 2006: 42). In a move that infuriated the already weathered workers, the government decreed in May that work norms in industry would be raised by 10 percent, meaning that workers output would have to increase by that rate while salaries would remain at the same levels. The purpose of these measures was to improve agricultural productivity in order to rectify the food shortages that had plagued the country since 1952, but the new policies were implemented without broad discussion in the lower ranks of the party, and without the input of labor organizations such as the FDGB (Free German Trade Union Federation). As a result, the population’s discontent was heightened (Stibbe 2006: 41-2)

The actual uprising began when workers at a Berlin construction site held a sit-down strike in protest at the new work quotas. The strikers drafted a resolution they collectively delivered to the Council of Ministers. As they marched down the streets of Berlin they chanted slogans such as “We want free elections!” and “We want to be free human beings, not slaves!” which suggests that the motivation for their protest activity was not only economic in nature, but also a political objection to the undemocratic rule of the SED. During the march the protesters were joined by bystanders, and by the time they reached the Council, somebody had proposed a general strike. Consequently, strikes and demonstrations took place throughout East Germany the following day, and crowds frustrated by years of perceived mismanagement of the country relieved some of the pressure by attacking government offices (Nepstad 2011: 39-40). Stibbe (2006) has succinctly captured the scope of the protests in the following week:

In East Berlin an estimated 90,000 people poured on to the streets, and throughout East Germany the number of demonstrators swelled to around 418,000. Strikes were called in 593 factories, with just under half a million workers, or 5 per cent of the workforce, taking part. Outside Berlin, the areas most seriously affected were the industrial regions of Halle, Magdeburg and Leipzig, traditionally strongholds of the German left and the workers’ movement; but there were also disturbances in many smaller towns as well.
(43-4)

When the government failed to take control of the situation, the Soviet military commander in Berlin declared martial law and Soviet troops were called in to break up the demonstrations and restore order to the factories. As even these actions failed to pacify the protestors, the Soviet soldiers resorted to outright repression: at least 51 demonstrators were killed and by the end of August 13,000 people had been arrested. Of those arrested, 1,400 received life sentences and 200 were executed (Nepstad 2011; Stibbe 2006). While the larger demonstrations were crushed by June 17th, isolated incidents continued to occur for another week (Stibbe 2006: 44). While the uprising of 1953 represents a major event in the history of the GDR, and can be positioned as the beginning of opposition to the SED's rule, the incident is also noteworthy for another reason: it represents the last major challenge to the communist rulers before 1989 (Port 2007: 2).

If one wants to take a shorter view of the democratization process, the Helsinki agreement of 1975, or even the initiation of West Germany's (FRG) policy of *Ostpolitik* (the opening of relations with the Eastern Bloc, and the GDR in particular) in the late 1960s and early 1970s can be viewed as starting points of the democratization process. Although Grieder (2006) points out that the precise role played by *Ostpolitik* in bringing about the fall of the GDR is open to debate, "it helped to create some important prerequisites for the 1989 revolution" (160). On December 21, 1972, the two Germanies signed the "Basic Treaty," which helped thaw relations between the two countries (Grieder 2006: 161). Bonn's strategy was to penetrate the Eastern Bloc with Western values in an attempt to reduce Cold War tensions. The Helsinki Final Act of 1975 had similar strategic goals in mind, and I will return to the impact of *détente* in the next section. Yet another option is to make the ascension of Gorbachev to the Soviet premiership and his 1985 announcement of the twin reforms of glasnost and perestroika the beginning of democratization process. Without a doubt the "Gorbachev effect" played a crucial role in the dismantling of GDR communism, and this aspect of the democratization process will be discussed under the heading of "Contingent Political Opportunities."

For social movement scholars it is tempting to identify the emergence of popular protests in the late 1970s and early 1980s as the starting point of the democratization process. As I will show below, small-scale activism commenced in the late 1970s after the Helsinki Agreement had been signed. Should one prefer to take a more short-term view of the transition and make these protests the starting point of the democratization process, then either the initiation of the "Peace Prayers" in 1982 or the first pro-democracy protests in 1987 would be appropriate starting points. My personal opinion, however, is that focusing on the immediate protest activities that preceded the fall of the GDR amounts to a failure to properly historicize the East German transition to democracy. I would therefore be inclined to pay some attention to the events of 1953 and thereafter progress to the Helsinki Final Act as the starting point of the

relevant time period.

But what about an end point? Here one could settle on one of the following key moments:

- 1) The deletion of the SED's leading role in East Germany from the constitution on November 24, 1989
- 2) The resignation of all members of the Politburo and the Central Committee by December 4
- 3) The national roundtable meetings that took place between December 7, 1989, and March 12, 1990
- 4) The creation of a unity "government of national responsibility" on February 5, 1990
- 5) The first free and open East German election on March 18, 1990
- 6) The unification of the two Germanies on October 3, 1990
- 7) The all-German elections on December 2, 1990

My inclination would be to take unification as the end point, simply because it so definitively prevented any real risk of a reversal of the democratization process. However, as far as mobilization from below is concerned, one could probably end the investigation long before that, for example at the time of the March election.

Structural Conditions

It can be argued that two major structural conditions helped set the stage for the 1989 revolution. Here it is important to note that these two conditions – the signing of the Helsinki Final Act in 1975 with its explicit commitment to human rights and the deteriorating economic situation of the GDR in the 1970s and 1980s – did not by themselves cause the revolution. The Helsinki Agreement, in particular, only assumed real importance and revolutionary potential when it was coupled with Gorbachev's reform program in the mid-1980s. (I will discuss the "Gorbachev effect" in the next section as a "contingent political opportunity.") The economic downturn, on the other hand, spans too long a period to be identified as an immediate cause of the revolution. As we will see in the "protest section" of this report, economic grievances were not among the population's top concerns in 1989. Nonetheless, the Helsinki agreement and the economic downturn did contribute to the creation of a "revolutionary situation" (Tilly 1978) in the late 1980s.

Chancellor Willy Brandt's decision to change the course of the FRG's relations with the Eastern Bloc in general and the GDR in particular in the late 1960s helped set the stage for *rapprochement* between the West and the East. Unlike

his predecessors, Brandt recognized the potential advantages of engaging Moscow and the GDR and the possible benefits of providing economic assistance to East Germany. As mentioned above, the so-called “Basic Treaty” between the two Germanies was signed in 1972. This agreement acknowledged the existence of “two German states in one nation” and allowed the FRG to abandon the Hallstein Doctrine, which mandated that West Germany abstain from full diplomatic relations with any country, other than the USSR, that recognized the GDR (Grieder 2006: 160-1).

Brandt’s efforts to normalize relations with his eastern neighbor was only the first step in the *détente* that was to take place between the blocs in the mid-1970s. As Dale (2005) has noted, within this process “the trickiest problems for the SED was its participation in the Conference for Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) talks, which culminated in Honecker’s signing of the Helsinki Declaration in 1975” (86). The East German leader, like most of the Eastern bloc colleagues, considered the signing of the Final Act a success as it “bound signatory states to mutual recognition of territorial integrity, including respect for existing borders” (Dale 2005: 86). This meant that the borders established at the end of World War II were considered legal by all parties, and in effect made it impossible for the West to deny the existence of an East Germany independent from its Western counterpart. However, in exchange for the West’s territorial concessions, all signatories of the Final Act committed to respect human and civil rights by virtue of the provisions contained within the “third basket” of the agreement. By signing the document the communist regime therefore bound itself to uphold many rights it would find difficult to respect, including the right to international travel, the right to family contact, and the right to freedom of information. While the GDR leadership had no real intention of honoring this commitment, it did nevertheless publish the complete treaty in the official newspaper *Neues Deutschland*. As a consequence, East Germans drew their own conclusions based on the agreement and began to apply for exit visas in significant numbers. When word began to spread that visas were indeed being granted, the number of applications increased exponentially. Whereas the late 1970s witnessed an average of 7,200 first-time applications and the granting of 4,600 exit visas per year, the numbers had reached 12,600 annual applications and 7,000 visas by the early 1980s. In 1984 the visa numbers peaked at 57,600 applications and 29,800 visas (Dale 2005: 87). According to Norman Naimark (1992) the numbers of visa applicants were even higher. According to him “soon after the Helsinki agreement was signed ... some 100,000 to 200,000 GDR citizens applied for an exit visa” and those who applied often cited “the

Helsinki provisions that guaranteed the right of free emigration” (78-9).¹

¹Grieder (2006: 162) reports similarly high numbers of visa applicants following the signing of the Helsinki Final Act. Dale (2005: 88) confirms the common reference to the agreement among would-be emigrants by pointing to a 1976 petition signed by visa applicants in Riesa that “called upon the government to honour the

While numbers remained high throughout the rest of the GDR's existence, it is worth noting that the numbers fell slightly beginning in 1985 (Dale 2005: 87), perhaps suggesting popular recognition that the emergence of Gorbachev had made the prospect of reform in East Germany feasible, and that people were therefore opting for "voice" over "exit."

While it is tempting to assume that the GDR's commitment to human rights could not have elicited any sort of meaningful oppositional response from a population used to the state's empty rhetoric, Steven Pfaff (2006), citing Sidney Tarrow, has argued that such an assumption misses the point. Tarrow "explains that even if it was only meant as a formal gesture, the endorsement of the Helsinki accords provided a common metric with which Soviet bloc dissidents could evaluate government actions and frame their opposition in language that would gain foreign sympathy for their struggles" (Pfaff 2006: 90). Going a step further in his line of reasoning, this time leaning on the work of Keck and Sikkink, Pfaff (2006) convincingly suggests that "in the late 1980s East German dissidents found that human rights messages resonated with Western journalists and humanitarian organizations, whose attention afforded some protection. And with so many East German households watching German television, coverage of dissidents expressing human rights claims often "boomeranged" back into the GDR on the nightly news" (90).

The Helsinki Agreement provided those looking to leave the GDR with a legal framework within which to present their demands. While the wave of potential emigrants amounted to an administrative and political nightmare, one should not overlook the fact that this development also afforded the government the possibility to relieve some of the pressure it was facing from those East Germans most disgruntled with the regime's policies. By allowing some dissidents to leave the country, the government could claim to be abiding by the CSCE treaty and thus earn some credit abroad. Besides international goodwill, the voluntary departure of some of the more vocal critics of the regime meant that the government bought itself some respite from internal opposition. Some of those opting to exit the GDR in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s were political prisoners for whom the West German government in Bonn paid its East German counterpart around 70,000 Deutschmarks each. This questionable "trade" brought the GDR leadership 3.4 billion Deutschmarks, a significant sum that helped mitigate some of the accumulating economic losses of the country. Yet despite these benefits for the state one must not fail to recognize that on the whole the wave of exits made for a dangerous precedent. As Dale correctly points out, "in the long term, the threat arose of the general public coming to support the right to emigrate" (Dale 2005: 87). On a final note, it should be noted that "the SED's need to avoid public displays of repression in the era of

Helsinki agreements and appealed to other international actors (including the United Nations) to press for the same."

Helsinki” contributed to its decision to use the country’s Protestant Churches as outlets of popular discontent (Grieder 2006: 162); but I will return to this in my discussion of civil society.

If the Helsinki Final Act and its accompanying human rights framework represent the first important structural condition of the East German democratization process, then the country’s failing economy constitutes the second. According to Grieder (2006), “the most damaging and counterproductive aspect of this dictatorship was its bureaucratic stranglehold on the economy” (159). Once ranked as the 10th industrial power in the world, by 1988 the GDR had fallen to 26th place. Some of the reasons for this economic decay included the country’s inability to keep pace with technological developments and declining demand for East German products. By 1989, the country had amassed a foreign debt of \$26.5 billion (Nepstad 2011: 44). Unlike his predecessors, Honecker had in the early 1970s decided to abandon the GDR’s decentralizing economic reforms and instead opted to nationalize all remaining privately and semi-privately operated businesses. While this system had worked relatively well for some of the less developed Soviet satellite states in Eastern Europe, in East Germany it was not an effective long-term policy since the economy was highly advanced and diverse. As a result, these industries began to experience supply problems and both growth and productivity rates plummeted. In addition to these production-related problems, the economy also suffered under the considerable weight of state funding for the army, the Stasi, and the state bureaucracy (Grieder 2006). As one scholar sums up the situation, “In many ways, then, East German totalitarianism was self-defeating” (Grieder 2006: 159). The combination of a failing economy and a population ready to demand the human and political rights their government had committed itself to protecting made for a potentially explosive situation. The first match to be lit under this democratization brew was the elevation of Mikhail Gorbachev to the Soviet premiership in 1985 and his announcement of the twin policies of *Glasnost* and *Perestroika*.

Contingent Political Opportunities

In the previous section I identified the signing of the Helsinki Final Act as a central structural condition of the 1989 revolution and the subsequent transition to democracy. But if the most pertinent structural condition was in place as early as 1975, why did the revolution not occur until 1989? The answer to this question is that although some Western pressure was being exerted on the GDR to live up to its human rights commitments, the USSR did not exert any similar pressure on Berlin. As a consequence, the regime’s violation of human rights, such as the right to international travel, went largely unpunished and did not upset the relationship between East Germany and its most important ally. This arrangement changed drastically when Mikhail Gorbachev became General

Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) on March 12, 1985, and shortly thereafter announced the implementation of the two new policies that would forever change not only Eastern Europe, but the continent as a whole, and indeed the world. Gorbachev considered *Glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring) essential components in his efforts to transform the Soviet Union into a more efficient and competitive nation. Cold War expenditures, including the arms race, had placed a significant burden on the Soviet state finances, which led the new premier to conclude that the country's costly military presence throughout Europe increased the state's vulnerability rather than its security. At the CPSU's Central Committee plenum in February 1988, Gorbachev therefore announced that the USSR would reduce its international presence, and "conceded the right of every people and every country to 'choose freely its social and political system'" (Grieder 2006: 164). Of course, Gorbachev did not intend for this policy change to lead to the fall of communism in Europe, as he firmly believed that each communist regime would be able to reform itself according to the house rules of *glasnost* and *perestroika* (Grieder 2006). However, the Soviet leader appears to have underestimated the impact his policies would have not only on the regimes of Eastern Europe, but also on its populations.

While Gorbachev may have been impervious to the impact his policy announcement would have across Eastern Europe, the same cannot be said of the Stasi. As early as 1985 the state security agency "warned of growing interest in the 'demagogic,' 'bourgeois-liberal' conception of human rights and feared that dissidents might mobilize a 'democratic mass movement'" that "would 'intend to put permanent pressure on the party and state leadership'" (Pfaff 2006: 90-1). In other words, it appears East German activists had no difficulty recognizing the potential opportunities for mobilization represented by Gorbachev's reforms. For example, in 1986 human rights activist formed the Initiative for Peace and Human Rights (Initiative für Frieden und Menschenrechte, IFM), which published "frequent reports on reforms" in the Eastern Bloc, as well as the Helsinki documents and the United Nations Charter on Human Rights in its entirety (Pfaff 2006: 91). Dale (2005) has suggested that Moscow's "new thinking" constituted a greater threat to the GDR than any other country in the region, since "the SED's dependence on the USSR ... was absolute" (121). This interpretation is supported by the fact that the GDR's revised constitution of 1974 states, in no uncertain language, that "the German Democratic Republic is forever and irrevocably allied with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics," which in turn leads Grieder to conclude that "the GDR's dependence on the Soviet Union was ultimately its undoing" (2006: 171). Similar claims have been made about Czechoslovakia's relationship with the Soviet Union, and while it is perhaps not a pressing task to ascertain which of the countries had the most dependent relationship with the superpower, it is worth emphasizing that Czechoslovakia and East Germany have often been

identified as the two most repressive and Moscow-faithful communist regimes. Perhaps not wholly coincidentally, these two countries were also the same that experienced the most clear-cut cases of nonviolent revolutions resting on a rhetorical framework of human rights.

While the USSR repeatedly professed its support for the SED, East German party “leaders knew that they could no longer rely on the type of military intervention that the Kremlin provided during the 1953 uprising. Thus Soviet withdrawal of economic and military support decreased the regime’s power and increased the opposition movements’ leverage” (Nepstad 2011: 43). As we will see in the “protest” section of this report, this knowledge resulted in a situation in which SED leaders were unwilling to order the all-out repression of unarmed demonstrators. Without Soviet military backing and support for its Stalinist ideology, the GDR leadership recognized that its position was tenuous at best when massive demonstrations broke out in September/October 1989. In short then, Gorbachev’s reforms represent, in my opinion, the main available political opportunity of the era, since the compatibility between human rights (Helsinki), *glasnost* and non-interference (Gorbachev), and the strategic decision to fight nonviolently (1989), created an incredibly potent revolutionary mix.

A few other, more immediate, political opportunities are worth mentioning. One that put tremendous pressure on the GDR and altered the image of the regime’s being in control was Hungary’s decision to abandon a 1969 agreement between the two countries that bound each government to “honor each other’s travel restrictions.” Communist states had traditionally prevented each other’s citizens from exiting the Bloc, but on May 2, 1989, the Hungarian government decided to relax controls at its border with Austria, and many East Germans began to “illegally” exit Eastern Europe through Hungary. While Berlin was less than impressed with this perceived act of Hungarian treason, events had not yet reached their climax. On September 11th, the Budapest government reached the conclusion that its main obligation was no longer to honor the 1969 treaty, or even an earlier 1956 agreement to hand over illegal visitors, but rather to uphold the United Nations agreement on refugees. This meant that East Germans could, by the tens of thousands, leave their home country relatively legally, and that there was little the government could do to stop them. What was perhaps even more disconcerting for Berlin was that Moscow observed Budapest’s decision without even voicing its opposition (Dale 2005; Maier 1997; Naimark 1992). As Roger East (1992) puts it, “the floodgates opened” (66) and risked throwing the GDR into complete chaos. Naturally, this weakened the regime and thereby provided activists with increased opportunities to protest.

Another important political opportunity emerged with the local elections held in May 1989. Based on the fact that “properly conducted” elections had

been held in the Soviet Union the previous year, East German voters were disappointed to once again be faced with choice-free ballots. Since GDR elections consisted of the presentation of complete slates of candidates that voters could only approve or disapprove, activists called upon citizens to officially register their discontent by voting “no.” Groups connected to the Church then monitored many polling stations in order to assess the rate of “no” votes. But while observers estimated such votes at between 10 and 20 percent, the official result presented by the authorities showed that 98.85 percent of the electorate had approved of the government’s lists composed of National Front candidates. In response to this alleged fraud, outraged activists called for monthly protests on the seventh day of each month in Berlin. On June 7th, the day of the first protest, more than 100 demonstrators were arrested by the police and taken in for questioning. As a clear indication of the changing political climate in the country, 1,500 activists joined a demonstration held the next day in protest against the arrests (Dale 2005; Naimark 1992; Saxonberg 2001).

One final political opportunity occurred at a decisive point in the revolutionary process. In early October, Gorbachev visited the GDR to attend the country’s 40th anniversary celebrations. While making the usual polite speeches and giving the appropriate nods to Honecker and other SED leaders, Gorbachev also remained true to his political agenda. As the leader of the Soviet Union he could not be controlled by his East German hosts at all times, and he ordered his car to be stopped several times so that he could greet the people on the street who were chanting his name, by now synonymous with calls for democracy and human rights. “If you really want democracy,” Gorbachev purportedly told the masses, “then take it, and you will have it!” (Reich 1990: 85). While it remains questionable that the leader did indeed utter these words, his famous advice to Honecker contains no such doubts: “Those who come late will be punished by history” (Reich 1990: 85). The East German elites did indeed come late, were punished by history, and are those to whom we now turn our attention.

Elites

As in the case of Czechoslovakia, the matter of East German elites is fairly straightforward. For all meaningful purposes only one elite group existed: the leadership of the SED. The party had cemented its position by including a reference to its leading role in the country’s constitution, and it was not until well after the fall of the wall that this stipulation was removed. Whereas the literature on democratization, which often takes an elite-based perspective, might expect the absence of competing elites to be beneficial for the SED, it seems the party’s undisputed position at the top of the social hierarchy amounted to isolation rather than domination at the time of the crisis. Unlike dictators in Latin America for example, the political elites in the GDR had no

allies on whom they could rely. The nationalization of all industries meant that there were no economic elites that had an interest in promoting the status quo. Similarly, the armed forces, including the military, the Stasi, the police, and the militias, took their orders directly from the party. Orders on how to deal with demonstrators were supposed to be issued not by military commanders, but by the political leadership in Berlin. In short, the diversity of elites present in other authoritarian systems simply did not exist in the GDR, since the party sought to incorporate every element of society.

But could this not have been a strength? The fact that there was only one elite group present should logically have eliminated the possibility of intra-elite divisions. Rather than worrying about landowners or military commanders, East Germany's rulers only had to prevent divisions within their own close ranks in order to avoid the kind of ruptures that many democratization scholars consider crucial for state breakdown. This scenario may have played out had the SED leadership indeed been the sovereign rulers of the country. However, the SED leaders were not the absolute decision makers in the GDR. Instead, they were dependent on the support of Moscow.

Perhaps the best illustration of the hollow nature of the SED's power is the leadership's response to the demonstrations of September and October 1989. A strong and independent East German leadership would have done what the Chinese communists did when their power was threatened in late spring that year — respond with overwhelming force. But despite the fact that the SED leadership had the privilege of observing the effectiveness of a “Chinese solution” and clearly contemplated one of their own, no order to severely repress the pro-democracy demonstrations in Leipzig and Berlin was ever issued. Scholars have shown that this was not due to the fact that Honecker, Mielke, Krenz, and others were sympathetic to the cause of the protesters, but simply because none of them wanted to be held responsible for a bloodbath that the true elites of the GDR — its allies in Moscow — would undoubtedly disapprove of (Maier 1997; Naimark 1992; Nepstad 2011; Saxonberg 2001). The result of this dependent relationship with Moscow was that the SED, the sole and uncontested elite of the GDR, simply “withered away” in the face of initially relatively modest demonstrations. This manifestation of a complete absence of power is perhaps one of the most interesting puzzles of the Eastern European revolutions: communist/socialist parties that had ruled supreme for nearly half a century were in fact Wizards of Oz — mythic structures without any real weight behind them once the USSR withdrew its unconditional support.

Before moving on to the carriers of change in East Germany, it is worth pointing out that the weakness of the GDR's elites was not only due to Moscow's withdrawn support. As Grieder (2006) has shown, the East German leadership was also

desperate to maintain stable relations with the Federal Republic [of Germany], not only because they craved international recognition, but also because they became more and more dependent on it for economic assistance. The result of this increasingly lopsided relationship was a reduction in overtly oppressive measures taken against the East German population. ... When the regime abstained from using force to crush the revolution of 1989, this was partly because it feared losing its hard-won international status and economic aid. (163)

In a sense then, the regime was caught between a rock (Moscow) and a hard place (Bonn), which suggests that the strength of the East German leadership was nothing but a mirage. Its absence of strength meant that even a relatively unorganized, spontaneous revolution presented the SED leaders with a greater challenge than they could handle.

Civil Society

For years there had been dissidents in East Germany, just like those in Poland and Russia, but more hidden. Then in the early eighties we came to the surface. The new opposition was individualistic and bohemian, and composed of a kaleidoscope of “counter-culture” social groups: hippies, Maoists, anarchists, human rights groups, greens, gays, lesbians, the protesting “church from below” – a very colourful mixture, with lots of rock music; in fact, to professional people and academics, frankly somewhat alien! (Reich 1990: 71-2)

Religious Movements

The role of the East German Church in the democratization process has been touched upon by virtually every main chronicler of the transition. The reason is plain: the Protestant churches played a central part in the democratization movement, and without the Church’s assistance it is likely that the 1989 revolution would have looked very different. But the position of the Church was complex. Throughout the SED’s rule, the Church had often found itself in opposition to state policy, and “in certain respects the Church was a natural home for critical spirits” (Dale 2005: 103). Ever since the early 1950s, the Church had clashed with the government on issues such as conscientious objection in 1955, conscription in 1960, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1980. As in the Polish case, the Church had come to offer “a second public sphere” where at least some space for dissent could be found (Dale 2005: 103). The early 1970s represented a warming in relations between the state and the Church as the Protestant Church officially announced its acceptance of the state’s legitimacy and asserted that it would from now on regard itself as a “Church in socialism.” In March 1978, the new friendship between state and

church culminated in an official agreement that afforded the Church hierarchy “acknowledged authority status” in exchange for a more co-operative stance towards the regime. As a component of this new understanding between the two parties, “churches were permitted to act as arenas for the ventilation of dissent; their public meeting rooms and printing equipment became available to the groups that gathered within their walls” (Dale 2005: 101). For dissidents, this amounted to an enormous improvement on the status quo. Prior to the 1978 agreement, oppositionists had to gather in state-owned institutions, which naturally provided a less than ideal environment for the free expression of opinions (Dale 2005).

But what drove the SED to make such a disastrous deal with the Church? Nepstad (2011: 41) has suggested that the relative weakness of the Church in the late 1970s made Honecker confident that the Party would be able to dictate the conditions of the alliance. But Grieder’s (2006) interpretation is perhaps more convincing: in the aftermath of the 1975 Helsinki Agreement, the state was eager to “avoid public displays of repression” (162) that would clearly violate the terms of that treaty. Honecker and his colleagues reached the conclusion that by allowing dissent to be institutionalized within the Church it would be easier to control and keep track of dissenters. Since the Church had agreed to be a “Church in socialism,” infiltration by the party should be easy to accomplish. However, the SED made a serious miscalculation when it assumed that the Church operated according to the same centralized principles as the rest of the socialist apparatus. While the leaders of the Church had grown comfortable with the socialist status quo and had little sympathy for dissenters, their churches were also home to many “turbulent priests” lower down in the hierarchy who cared little for the communist state. These priests were more than willing to let dissidents use Church premises for organizing purposes. As Grieder thus concludes, “the March 1978 agreement was undoubtedly a key turning point in the history of the GDR” (2006: 162).

As we will see below, the Church played an important function as the host of various peace and ecological groups. Rather tellingly, most of these groups were neither religious in nature nor membership. However, they were more than happy to share a space with pastors sympathetic to their cause, although a majority of the protestant churches sided with the state against the opposition groups (Reich 1990: 72). In addition to peace and environmental groups, some congregations sponsored human rights groups. For example, one East Berlin congregation allowed activists to use its facilities to produce reports that pointed to the discrepancy between international human rights standards and the actions of the SED. The reports were then distributed with a cover page reading “For Internal Church Use Only.” Naturally, the reports were distributed widely outside the church. The Stasi was well aware of this tactic, but “they were unable suppress it because of the church’s protective coverage” (Nepstad 2011: 41).

In addition to harboring opposition groups, the Church, or at least some of its pastors, played a central role in the 1989 revolution. The “Peace Prayers” were the catalyst that triggered the nonviolent protests that brought down the SED regime. The practice of Peace Prayers was initiated in 1982 when Deacon Günter Johannsen began to hold weekly prayer meetings on Mondays at five o’clock at the Nikolaikirche in Leipzig (Maier 1997: 139). Even at this point in time, years before Gorbachev announced his reforms, the church offered discontent East Germans some, albeit limited, oppositional space. Still, it is important to note that the Church was indeed complex, as were its relationships with both the state and the opposition, and one should not therefore overstate its role in the democratization process. It is more fruitful and historically correct to emphasize the role of certain pastors and congregations (Dale 2005: 106). Nonetheless, the structural condition created by the *détente* between church and state did create the space necessary for the advent of an East German protest culture in the late 1970s and early 1980s, long before any democratization movement existed. Finally, the Church and its pastors helped steer the revolution in the direction of nonviolence in 1989. I will return to this aspect of the Church’s role in the discussion of “Protest” below.

New Social Movements

One of the most important new social movements to emerge in the GDR in the late 1970s and the early 1980s was the peace movement. For natural reasons, many pastors were able to get behind this movement, and the peace movement was therefore one of the most likely beneficiaries of church support. As Dale (2005) explains,

From 1979 until 1983 the autonomous peace movement went from strength to strength. Communications amongst the disparate groups improved, and a national co-ordinating centre was established. ... Events with a peace theme became increasingly popular. Thousands attended Rainer Eppelmann’s “Blues services”, 3,500 came to an independent peace event in Potsdam in 1982, and around 10,000 congregated at a Christian peace festival in Eisenach. Alongside burgeoning numbers, a minority began to express more radical opinions, arguing that activities should reach beyond the confines of the Church. A number of attempts were made to hold public vigils: by “Women for Peace” in Berlin, and by activists around Roland Jahn in Jena, for example. The “Berlin Appeal” of January 1982, launched by the dissident Communist Robert Havemann and Reverend Eppelmann, raised taboo demands, a nuclear weapon-free Europe, the withdrawal of all occupying forces from both German states and freedom of expression; and thereby confirmed the regime’s fears that the peace issue could stray towards explosive questions of the division of Germany, the GDR’s reliance on a foreign power, and civil liberties. A signal event, it was the first direct appeal to the general public on behalf of an independent movement and, despite references to so many forbidden themes, gathered over 2,000 signatures. (Dale 2005: 101)

This quote is informative for a few reasons. First, it concretely shows that peace activism did indeed take place in the early 1980s, but more crucially, it suggests that the peace movement was to become important not because of the subject it advocated, but because it had the potential to evolve into more regime critical activism. The Church had a legitimate interest in peace issues and organized the “Peace Decade” — a 10-day event held in November each year that included workshops, prayer services, and dialogue that all focused on such issues as nuclear weapons, militarism, and peace. Many activists were of course concerned about the political situation in Europe at the time, but there was also another reason why peace activism became the dominant new social movement of the early 1980s: it was certified by the state. In response to geopolitical events, and in particular the Cold War arms race, the SED had in effect created its own peace movement in the late 1970s. Since the regime itself advocated in favor of peace related issues it was difficult to criticize citizens doing likewise.

Similarly, the environmental movement that operated in parallel to the peace movement was difficult to demonize since it provided the state with some important services, including the planting of trees. According to Dale (2005), the environmental movement grew out of the declining peace movement in the mid-1980s. Although environmental groups had been around since the 1970s, it was not until this point that they assumed importance. In the late 1970s East Germans began to protest on ecological grounds: against the building of a highway, the destruction of a meadow, toxic waste dumps, and other similar issues. The tactics used were non-confrontational and included educational and letter writing campaigns (Dale 2005: 102).

In time, the movement’s ability to stage small protests led the regime to view it as a potential threat. Because West Germans had recently formed a Green Party, the SED were concerned that a similar development might occur in the GDR and a green opposition would emerge. The regime’s response was to distinguish between those activists considered to be radical and those deemed harmless protectors of the environment. While the former were repressed, the latter were encouraged and continued to advocate green issues (Dale 2005: 102-3). While this strategy made sense at the time, it still allowed mobilization to take place. Seemingly non-threatening to the regime, the environmental movement provided those keen to express their opinion with an avenue to do so publicly. In this way, one might argue that even semi-political protest contributed to the emergence of a protest culture in the mid and late 1980s. Towards the end of the decade, the environmental movements teamed up with churches to establish environmental libraries. “The first was formed in 1987 at East Berlin’s Zion Church, where activists reported on the state’s environmental abuses. Within two years, the number of church-based environmental libraries had grown to more than 20” (Nepstad 2011: 41). By then it was clear that the

movement was not as harmless as the regime had chosen to believe.

Both the peace and the environmental movements thus appear to have been important mainly because they allowed people to mobilize on semi-political issues. The peace movement experienced significant setbacks in the mid-1980s when many activists escaped the GDR. Still, these new social movement groups were important to the development of a social movement culture that took its place in the GDR in the mid 1980s. For example, many of those who had taken part in the peace and ecological movements were the very same people who later participated in the democratization movement (Dale 2005; Maier 1997).

Women played an important role in the revolution by participating in the demonstrations that eventually forced the regime to resign. As one leader of New Forum explains:

Women played a fundamental part in making our revolution, and it, along with the role of young people, should be recognized. At an early stage, the sanctuary of the Gethsemane Church was the focus and the beacon of our movement. Every evening around the Gethsemane Church, people walked silently in the great ritual of our revolution. Women and young people enacted it, with candles, parading humbly and defencelessly but in awesome unity of purpose in front of the dreadful apparatus of State repression. The riot-police cordon, the armoured trucks, the water cannon. They demonstrated without any sign of fear. They quietly placed their candles on the street, sat down and waited until they were carried away or beaten up or arrested after Neues Forum had been declared illegal and unconstitutional. (Reich 1990: 88)

In addition, women's activist groups, if not forming an outright movement, existed alongside other civil society groups in the 1980s.

The women's movement had a long tradition in the GDR. As early as 1947 women established the *Demokratischer Frauenbund Deutschland* (DFD), which by the end of the year had 242,000 members. However, the organization was soon incorporated by the state and became a tool for political indoctrination. In 1989, the DFD remained faithful to the regime and boasted almost one and a half million members (Kranz 2010). However, some independent women's groups came into existence in the 1980s, all under the umbrella of the Church. The overarching theme appears to have been issues of peace, which makes sense since this was the main concern of church-related activism at the time, but women's groups also campaigned for the rights of women and homosexuals (Dale 2005: 106). For example, in 1982 women established the group *Frauen für den Frieden*, which mobilized around the issues of nuclear disarmament and the rights of conscientious objectors (Kranz 2010). In the middle of the decade the group expanded its repertoire and began to criticize "the educational system of the GDR [which] promoted gender

segregation, traditional gender roles, and military themes” (Kranz 2010: 8).

By the time of the fall of the regime *Frauen für den Frieden* no longer existed.

When the first nationwide women’s meeting took place in 1988, Women for Peace had given up its original reasons for establishment and was dissolved into a network of various women’s, peace, and civil groups whose main concern now was to reform the existing political system of the GDR into humane socialism with democratic features. The last official Women for Peace meeting mentioned in the archival records, took place in December 1988.

(Kranz 2010: 9)

Like so many other groups then, the main women’s group did not advocate revolution, but rather reform. Also, while women, like workers and students, participated in the demonstrations of September and October 1989, they appear to have done so outside of the context of women’s activism. Nonetheless, groups like Women for Peace contributed to the revolution by showing others that protest was possible.

Democratization Movements

Having fought a nonviolent revolution in the name of democracy, one would expect to find a strong democratization movement in the GDR in the 1980s. And while the presence of grassroots group did increase after 1986, “the number of individuals engaged in some sort of (broadly defined) ‘active resistance’ reached an estimated 20,000-25,000 each year” (Dale 2005: 124). While respectable, these numbers in no way seemed to spell trouble for the SED, and the Stasi’s estimates of the movement’s strength were even lower. In June of 1989, the agency identified 160 opposition groups (mainly pacifists, feminists, and environmentalists), 2,500 activists, and 600 people in “leadership positions.” Of the 2,500 activists, only 60 were identified as “hardcore activists” in a population of 16 million (Stokes 1993: 138). Naturally, the state felt that it was in control.

But an opposition did exist, and its momentum slowly began to build after Gorbachev assumed power and announced his reform agenda. Oppositionists organized a human rights seminar in Berlin in 1985 from which two organizations emerged: *Gegenstimmen* and *Initiative für Frieden und Menschenrechte* (IFM). IFM, the more important of the two, was formally established in January 1986. Its membership was made up of peace activists who sensed that the time might be ripe for more aggressive mobilization. Uniquely for its time, IFM’s

emphasis was specifically upon democracy and human rights in their political, and not social, aspects. The achievement of a peaceful domestic polity, IFM argued, requires the creation of a ‘critical public sphere’ and this, in turn, requires guaranteed civil liberties. IFM’s concrete demands – for democratic elections, freedom of association, and for a referendum on nuclear power – tapped into the concerns of many activists. Its magazine, *Grenzfall*, reached a print-run of around 1,000 but was read by a much wider audience than that figure would suggest. IFM was audacious, in that it openly articulated political opposition, but also because it dared to step outside the Church. Its publications, although often printed in church offices, lacked the usual imprimatur ‘for internal church use only’. As such it was an especially troublesome thorn in the government’s side, and one that was all the sharper for its concern to build bridges to other East European dissident movements, such as Charter 77. (Dale 2005: 127-8)

Besides playing an important role at a time when opposition to the government was rare, IFM members were to assume central positions within organizations such as New Forum and Democracy Now, to which I will return shortly. Perhaps the most noteworthy point to be made about IFM is that its agenda and time of emergence coincided with Gorbachev. In short, it can be argued that the democratization movement in the GDR sought to take advantage of the new situation in Soviet politics (Dale 2005: 126-8). IFM also inspired the creation of other groups. For example, “in 1987, [visa] applicants formed a Citizens’ Rights group, which was later to affiliate to IFM. Before long it had attracted several hundred members, and began to spread nationwide and organize public protests in several towns and cities. Applicants were making their presence felt as the vanguard of public protest.” (Dale 2005: 88)

While the IFM and a few other groups did what they could to disturb the state, it was not until the relationship between the USSR and the GDR began to suffer from the former’s desire to reform itself and the latter’s reluctance to follow suit that activists seriously began to mobilize (Maier 1997: 173). One of the earliest groups to take action was the Initiative Group for Life (IGL). Founded by Leipzig Pastors Führer and Wonneberger in 1988 in response to the growing number of participants in the weekly Peace Prayers, IGL offered those interested “workshops and training in nonviolent direct action” (Nepstad 2011: 42-3). The group’s first action came late in the evening of January 12, 1989, when IGL activists “quietly distributed thousands of leaflets calling for a demonstration at Leipzig’s City Hall” (Nepstad 2011: 43). In response to IGL’s call, a crowd of 800 gathered on January 17th. Police quickly dispersed the crowd and jailed nearly 100 participants, but a precedent had been set, and mass action continued to occur, albeit on a relatively limited scale.

From this point on civil society mobilization began to occur more rapidly. In March, dissidents created the Initiative für den Demokratischen Aufbruch (“Initiative for a Democratic Awakening” or DA) in anticipation of the elections

that were to be held in May, and in July the Initiative for a Social Democratic Party in the GDR emerged (Saxonberg 2001: 305). In August, with things changing quickly throughout Eastern Europe, oppositionists began to calculate that free elections may in fact be held relatively soon. In anticipation of such a development, intellectuals established Democracy Now (DN) and “by late August at least seventeen initiatives existed that aimed to establish some sort of independent oppositional presence” (Dale 2005: 148). Finally, on September 9th, what would become the most important of the opposition groups was founded, namely New Forum (NF) (Maier 1997: 136; Reich 1990: 72; Stokes 1993: 139).

Like its Czechoslovakian “role model” Charter 77, NF sought to be explicitly anti-political and copied some of Charter 77’s tactics. In its manifesto, entitled “Awakening 89,” NF claimed it had no intention of becoming a political party, but simply hoped to initiate “a democratic dialogue about the tasks of the constitutional state, the economy, and of culture” (Stokes 1993: 139), and identified its main task as being the harbinger of “communication between state and society” (Dale 2005: 148). As one of the founding members of NF points out, the organization’s central goal was to be representative of the East German people. Consequently, NF, “although not fully balanced, was a cross-section of normal people with normal professions and different political leanings” (Reich 1990: 73).

New Forum unsuccessfully applied for legal status as an organization, but the court’s rejection of this request mattered little as thousands of East Germans signed the group’s manifesto and groups of activists established themselves as parts of New Forum throughout the country. (Dale 2005: 148; Stokes 1993: 139). By mid-October, a month after its formation, NF boasted 25,000 members and 200,000 individuals had signed its manifesto (East 1992: 67; Nepstad 2011: 46). Still, New Forum played, as we shall see, a rather limited role during the revolution, and it was not until roundtable discussions were organized that NF emerged as one of the main voices of the people. This is important because it suggests that even the numerically most important organization in the GDR failed to lead the mobilization that occurred in September and October of 1989.

A plethora of democracy organizations came into existence in the fall of 1989. Dale (2005) explains:

“Alongside New Forum, DN and IFM, other groups announced their existence, notably the United Left (UL), Democratic Awakening (DA) and the Social Democratic Party (SDP). All of these organisations shared certain basic principles and goals, notably democratic transformation and ecological sustainability. That they did not formally unite was in part due to personal rivalries and the role of Stasi agents in exacerbating these, but it also came down to differences in philosophy, programme and strategy. Thus, New Forum, IFM, DA and DN drew more upon republican and liberal traditions whereas the UL gathered together reform-Communists, Trotskyists and anarchists. DN and

DA were more affirmative of socialism and more explicitly opposed to the SED's "leading role" than was New Forum. As regards organizational form, DA and the SDP quickly began to adopt party-political structures while New Forum, UL and DN developed along looser, "movement-oriented" lines. (148-9)

Despite their impressive numbers, no organization appears to have been able to take control of the revolution and organize the protests, and the democratization struggle thus justifies the epithet of "spontaneous" (Opp, Voss, & Gem 1995). This may have some important consequences for how we view democratization from below, and I will return to this line of thought in the conclusion.

Labor Movements

As in the case of Czechoslovakia, the labor movement is most conspicuous by its absence. In a country by definition made up by workers, the workers, as a coherent group, remained absent in the revolution. It appears their last stand was made as early as the 1953 uprising, and that any form of organized labor movement had then disappeared from the political map. It was not until roundtable discussions were about to begin that the workers offered New Forum their support through the promise of a general strike. At this point NF had to decide whether to engage in dialogue or to put further pressure on the government by announcing the general strike. After some deliberation the organization opted for the former and the role of the workers remained minimal for the entirety of the transition. Of course, this does not mean that individual workers did not participate in the revolution — they did, and in large numbers at that — but as an organized group they did not mobilize (Dale 2005: 164; Stibbe 2006: 43-4). The main reason why the workers as a group remained absent from the revolution can be traced to the fact that unions were not independent from the state. Like the universities, factories were under strict party control and organization against the state within the factories would therefore have been difficult to accomplish. As Maier (2009) explains, "[factory] associations were not organized to contest the regime, but to live in partnership with it" (269).

Student Movements

"The university was not a major source of protest in 1989" due to the fact that it was "too riddled with a younger generation of SED members, often frustrated by their unyielding geriatric national leadership, but too hobbled by their party affiliation to organize public protests or sing in prayer meetings" (Maier 1997: 138). Students were locked into the SED, as advancement within the University required party membership. Troublesome students were frequently expelled from the universities, which prevented the campuses from becoming political hotbeds. One exception to the relative apathy of the students is represented by

an incident in 1988 when student-led protests occurred in response to the government's decision to censor a reform-focused issue of the Soviet journal *Sputnik* (Dale 2005: 123). While students may have played a limited role in the revolution, intellectuals tried to influence the course of events toward the end of the revolution by arguing for the reform of the socialist system rather than a more drastic break with the past (Kupferberg 2002: 93-5).

This brief overview of East German civil society suggests that it was spontaneous citizens, rather than organized civil society, that played an important role in the events of the late 1980s. Unlike in Czechoslovakia, it seems that civil society groups had less impact on the course of events in the decade leading up to the transition. For example, we find no equivalent of Charter 77 or Solidarity in the GDR. Even the Peace Prayers, which were crucial to the revolution, had very low attendance rates before the fall of 1989. One scholar even goes so far as to suggest civil society “was not a concept that really made sense in the East German context” (Maier 2009: 270). While civil society and democratization movements existed and tried to make their voices heard, they were not drivers of the revolution in the manner seen elsewhere, as the examples of Otpor (Serbia), Kmara (Georgia), and Pora (Ukraine) suggest. In the words of Maier (2009), “the public protests did not rest on long preparation and power. ... Public protest, we can say, pulled itself up by the bootstraps” (265). As Pfaff (2006) summarizes the revolution, “in East Germany there were neither elite-led openings nor reformist factions that could move the reform cause forward until the popular revolution was already well under way. Throughout the revolution, the opposition remained marginal, weak, and divided” (4). However, this does not negate the fact that civil society groups played an important part in showing that mobilization against the state, albeit on a very limited scale, was possible in the late 1980s.

Protest

The fact that the 1989 revolution occurred in a largely spontaneous fashion is hardly surprising if one considers East Germany's record of mass protest in the second half of the 20th century. Whereas political struggle had been somewhat common in the first few years of the GDR's existence, the communist era was characterized by popular acquiescence. In the last three and half decades of the East German experiment protest activity was rare. “Sometimes, the political will of the people was expressed by organized opposition groups, demonstrations, or community and civil action, but usually the struggle went on at the level of the individual or family” (Naimark 1992 72-3), what Port has referred to as the “repertoire of everyday protest” which consisted of such acts as “the defacing of political posters (especially those with images of leading Communist officials), the clandestine distribution of oppositional leaflets, and the scribbling of critical graffiti in public places” (Port 2007: 120). As Port (2007) has further suggested,

one of the most striking aspects of the GDR was its remarkable stability: From the outside, it appeared to be one of the most stable states in Eastern Europe and its population among the most docile. *After the well-known mass uprising of June 1953 and before the fall of 1989, there were no major challenges to the regime from below* – even though ... many of the same social, economic, and political grievances that had led to the earlier upheaval remained pervasive [emphasis added]. (2)

Nonetheless, some exceptions exist. In 1965 inhabitants of Leipzig rioted in response to a ban on certain types of music, including that of the Beatles, and in 1968 the people of the same city mobilized to prevent the demolition of the Universitätskirche (Opp, Voss, and Gem 1995: 9-10). Furthermore, it is imprecise to say that demonstrations were uncommon in the GDR during the communist era. Rather, what was uncommon was for such demonstrations to be organized by non-state actors. In fact, prior to 1989 citizens were often required to participate in state-led demonstrations of various sorts as major events in the GDR's history were commemorated through displays of mass support for the state (Opp, Voss, and Gem 1995: 18). Instead of protesting with their mouths, people often opted to protest with their feet as episodes of mass exodus were relatively frequent throughout East Germany's history (Naimark 1992: 76-7; Port 2007: 113).

It was not until 1982 that organized mobilization began to take place, and when it did it happened under the protective, but often reluctant, shield offered by the Church. As noted above, the weekly "peace prayers" organized by progressive pastors in Leipzig helped set the stage for a small but burgeoning protest culture (Maier 1997: 139). For example, in 1983, visa applicants in Jena began to hold vigils in support of their demands for legalized emigration that attracted up to 180 people at a time. The choice of tactic suggests that the "exit movement" was learning from the church-based peace movement (Dale 2005: 88). While the peace prayers and actions such as those in Jena did not come close to challenging the state's hegemony, they did attract the attention of the authorities, with the Stasi increasing its attention to protest activity throughout the country as a consequence (Pfaff 2006). As mentioned previously, however, it was not until Gorbachev's entrance that protest in East Germany took off. As Dale (2005) explains, "following a phase of resignation in the middle years of the decade, oppositional activity revived from 1986, buoyed up by the wind from Moscow and by the developing 'anti' mood. Demands for democratic reform could now legitimately appeal to the model being practiced in the Great Socialist Brotherhood" (124). Exploiting the political opportunity represented by the Gorbachev effect, "East Germans began demonstrating for reforms similar to those being undertaken in the Soviet Union; and when challenged by police, they flaunted Soviet badges and pictures of Gorbachev" (Grieder 2006: 166). One of the first incidents of explicitly pro-democracy protests occurred

relatively spontaneously on June 8, 1987 when a crowd of young people assembled at the Brandenburg Gate to enjoy a rock concert held on the other side of the wall. When the police moved in to disperse the youths, violent clashes broke out with the crowd chanting “Gorbi! Gorbi!” and “the Wall must go!” (Grieder 2006: 166).

At this point, the government seems to have felt the dual pressures of Gorbachev’s reform agenda and popular discontent, and therefore decided to act. On the night of November 24, 1987, security agents raided the offices of the Umweltbibliothek in the basement of Berlin’s Zionkirche where IFM printed its samizdat publication *Grenzfall*. Seven people were arrested and the entire office was confiscated. As often occurred in episodes of regime repression, the state’s actions backfired as the raid “ignited a wave of protests which spread throughout Berlin and even beyond the GDR. After this time, the protest movement grew” (Opp, Voss, and Gem 1995: 12). Not learning from its mistake, only weeks later the regime arrested 160 IFM and Working Group protesters carrying banners and placards with quotations from early 20th century communist leaders such as Rosa Luxemburg, “freedom is always freedom for dissenters” (Dale 2005: 130; Grieder 2006: 166). As with the Zion Church incident, this ill-advised government action generated a significant popular response, with the *Financial Times* reporting that “tens of thousands of largely non-religious East Germans ... squeezed into normally empty Protestant churches in a powerful display of solidarity” (Dale 2005: 2005: 130). In response to this incident, the Leipzig Peace Prayers were transformed into solidarity services (Dale 2005: 131). The state reacted furiously to the politicization of the Peace Prayers and tried to force the Church, which itself disapproved of the actions of the activist pastors, to exert greater control over these events. In the summer of 1988 the Church consequently sought to take the Peace Prayers back from the grassroots organizations that now ran them in collaboration with select clergymen. Again, the state’s attempt at repression failed as it immediately sparked resistance.

Banners protesting the decision were taken into the church, and the altar was occupied. On that day, one local pastor recalls, “for the first time, people read a public statement in front of the church, namely the statement of the grass-roots groups concerning this whole issue”. Although the Peace Prayers had on occasion spilled into the streets in the early 1980s, this event reminded participants “that one can also stage a protest not only inside the church, but also in front of it”. *In short, the occasion marked an important addition to the action repertoire of the grassroots groups, and may be seen as the beginning of what was to become a series of public demonstrations ... that would ‘spontaneously’ emerge from the Peace Prayers on Mondays, later in 1988 and throughout 1989 [emphasis added].* The publicity given to the Peace Prayers, moreover, led others to follow suit. In towns across the country similar events began to attract hundreds of visitors and came to function as contact points and arenas for political discussion. (Dale 2005: 132-3)

From this point on, the Peace Prayer services became the undisputed loci of dissident activity, serving as a sort of “speaker’s corner” where political and social questions could be raised at relatively low risk. Pastor Wonneberger had taken over responsibility for the services in 1987 after moving to Leipzig from Dresden, and immediately began the process of giving activists an increased say in the content of the services (Pfaff 2006: 95). Importantly for the outcome of the revolution, Wonneberger also helped establish the Initiative Group for Life (Initiav-Gruppe-Leben, IGL) in 1988. This group endorsed nonviolent direct action and trained those interested in the topic in a series of workshops (Pfaff 2006: 95; Nepstad 2011).

On January 17, 1988, peace and human rights activists attended the aforementioned state sanctioned demonstrations in honor of Karl Lieberknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, two leaders of the abortive communist uprising in Berlin in 1919 who were later assassinated. The strategy of taking advantage of officially approved commemorations was used from time to time in the last few years of the GDR (activists again used the same opportunity in January 1989), but the regime did not appreciate the activists’ use of Luxemburg’s motto “Freedom is always freedom for dissenters” and arrested over a hundred of them (Grieder 2006: 166; Naimark 1982: 81). In addition to exploiting officially approved celebrations, activists also took advantage of the international community’s focused attention on the GDR. In March of 1989, during the Leipzig “Open to the World” fair, hundreds of activists marched with placards calling for travel rights on the opening day. Before western cameras, the police violently broke up the demonstration and arrested many of the protestors. On March 13th, these scenes were again repeated in front of foreign journalists as 850 people demonstrated before the police once more interjected.

As noted above, some mobilization occurred in connection with the fraudulent May elections, but it was not until the Leipzig Peace Prayers recommenced after the summer break that the revolution’s wheels were set in motion. On September 4th, the first Monday service of the season, more than a thousand people attended and concluded the evening by protesting in central Leipzig. The following week, police blocked off the square (St. Nicholas) outside the St. Nicholas Church where the services were taking place. “When a thousand prayer service participants exited and joined another thousand demonstrators outside the church, security officers ordered them to immediately disperse. As the crowd hesitated, the police aggressively arrested 100 people. In response, churches throughout East Germany held vigils to pray for the release of the prisoners” (Nepstad 2011: 46).

Aided by the spontaneous mobilization efforts of East Germans, fueled by an increasing sense of national moral outrage, events now spiraled out of control both for the state and would-be organizers. Sensing the moment’s

potential danger, on September 25th “Pastor Wonneberger took to the pulpit. In front of an audience of thousands, he drew on prophetic inspiration to preach stirringly: ‘He who practices violence, who threatens violence and employs it, will himself be the victim of that violence’” (Pfaff 2006: 103-4). Clearly the pastor recognized that the result of his workshops would soon be put to the test. As the crowd entered the streets following the service and grew to 4,000, the police, for unknown reasons, made only a few arrests (Nepstad 2011: 46). As social movement scholars we might argue that the lack of repression was crucial as it is likely to have helped reduce the fears of both protesters and onlookers of participating in future events. Furthermore, some scholars have suggested that the fact that even in the tense context of September 1989 the Peace Prayers were not either decisively broken up or prohibited contributed to the institutionalization of the protests: the people of Leipzig not only knew when the protests would take place, but had also become familiar with the nonviolent methods used (Pfaff 2006: 104-5; Saxonberg 2001: 309)

While the regime did what it could to control the protests, opposition to the state continued to grow. The October 2nd Peace Prayer (coincidentally Gandhi’s 120th birthday) saw the largest crowds to date congregate outside Nikolaikirche with 10,000 people attending the service. At this point events began to move very quickly. On October 7th, the SED celebrated the 40th anniversary of East Germany in Berlin along with dignitaries from 80 countries. As the state-organized parade took place, 10,000 activists demonstrated in Berlin. Almost a thousand of them were arrested as the police violently broke up the demonstration. In other parts of the country similar events took place with protestors often chanting “Gorbi! Gorbi” in a call for help from the Soviet leader, in Berlin at the time (Naimark 1992: 89; Nepstad 2011: 46). Despite repression, “the people were no longer intimidated and on October 8 demonstrations took place in Dresden, Leipzig, Berlin, Potsdam, and many other towns and cities” (Naimark 1992: 90). Predictably, the protests were broken up by the police, but by now the momentum of the revolution could not be stopped (Saxonberg 2001: 311). Nonetheless, the regime pondered a plan to put an end to the popular uprising once and for all.

In anticipation of the Monday Peace Prayers on October 9th, the SED leadership considered a “Chinese solution.” Rumors had spread that the regime had ordered the police, the military, and the militias to use whatever force necessary to break up the Leipzig demonstrations, and the hospitals had allegedly stocked up on blood. However, when the enormous crowd gathered outside the church — estimates vary from 50,000 to 110,000 — the expected clash failed to materialize (Dale 2005: 155; Naimark 1992: 92; Saxoberg 2001: 311). Opinions vary as to why the security forces didn’t attack. Some have argued that the police, en masse, simply refused to obey orders to attack the crowd when they understood its size and nonviolent demeanor (Nepstad 2011). While it certainly mattered that prominent citizens of Leipzig, such as the

famous conductor Kurt Masur, negotiated with local SED leaders for the security forces to remain peaceful if the crowds did the same (Naimark 1992: 91; Saxonberg 2001: 312; Stokes 1993: 140), other reasons for the nonviolent non-confrontation between demonstrators and police must be considered as well. I would argue that the most parsimonious explanation is that the regime simply never issued orders to use violence against unarmed protesters. Knowing that the USSR did not support such action, no SED leader, including Honecker and the Stasi chief Mielke, was willing to take responsibility for what promised to become an epic bloodbath. Hoping that someone else would shoulder the burden, no SED official, national or local, appears to have ordered violence to be used in Leipzig. As the crowd remained nonviolent, the security forces responded in kind (Maier 1997: 156; Nepstad 2011: 48; Pfaff 2006: 169-171; Saxonberg 2001: 313-4; Stokes 1993: 140).

The lack of repression on that fateful day secured the regime's destiny. As Stokes (1993) concludes, "the Leipzig demonstration of October 9 was the crucial moment when the Socialist Unity party lost control of East Germany. Convinced now that they were free to vent their frustrations in public, crowds began gathering regularly in towns throughout East Germany" (Stokes 1993: 140). The following Monday (September 16th), 150,000 people participated in the Peace Prayer, and the week after, the first Monday after Honecker's resignation on October 18th, the crowd grew to 200,000 men, women and children. On November 6th, half a million people demonstrated in Leipzig and a crowd of the same size gathered the same day in Berlin's Alexanderplatz (Naimark 1992: 91-2). By early November "opposition also spread from the streets to the workplace, where small waves of strikes occurred. The people's demands became stronger and clearer: an end to SED dominance, genuinely free elections, and unrestricted travel rights" (Nepstad 2011: 51). With the opening of the wall on November 9th and the commencement of roundtable talks later that month, the population's focus shifted away from protest towards the task of building a new life in a new society.

Conclusion

The East German transition brings some interesting issues regarding "democratization from below" to the fore. There can be little doubt that the 1989 revolution does not fall into the category of elite-led transitions. In fact, the SED leadership remained opposed to reform up until the very end, and only chose to reform itself when no other options were available. By that time the SED had already lost all of its power and the transition was well on its way. In short, the East German revolution does indeed constitute "democratization from below."

But what is the nature of the East German "below?" This report suggests

that civil society organizations, while present, were too weak to take charge of the revolution, even when organizations like NF were offered leadership on a silver platter in October 1989. The reason for this weakness may be related to the incredibly short history of most East German civil society organizations. Unlike Civil Forum, which grew out of Charter 77 and benefited from the charismatic leadership of Vaclav Havel, New Forum lacked an equivalent history. While some of its leaders and members had been involved in organizations such as the IFM, neither the “parent organizations” nor the members themselves had enough clout to assume leadership of the revolution, leaving the uprising both leaderless and spontaneous.

But does the absence of organized leadership make the revolution any less of a “bottom-up” affair? I would probably argue the opposite. The East German revolution was truly an example of “democratization from below” as it depended not on vanguards or organized efforts by counter-elites, but simply on individuals’ willingness to stand up against the regime. The revolution also suggests that in the face of such spontaneous mobilization, seemingly powerful regimes can collapse in a matter of weeks. It is however important to remember that the uprising did not occur in a geopolitical vacuum. The fact that Moscow had made it absolutely clear to Berlin that it would stand alone if it used violence against protesters probably represents the central explanatory factor of the revolution. Without Soviet support Honecker and his colleagues realized that they were doomed, and allowed themselves to be swept away by nonviolent revolutionaries.

That said, civil society organizations did play an important role in the revolution. The natural evolution of a weak, young, but still present democratization movement can be traced back to the religious/peace/ecological movement that preceded it. Before the masses gathered in their tens of thousands in Leipzig and Berlin, it was the small groups of dedicated activists that helped establish a protest culture in East Germany by showing that while difficult and costly, the regime could still be challenged. Furthermore, the repression of these “early risers” contributed to the moral outrage of the population at large and thus to the mobilization of massive demonstrations in the fall of 1989.

One final observation concerns the shocking weakness of the East German state. The GDR was considered one of the most stable and repressive regimes in the Eastern Bloc. However, once the withdrawal of Soviet support coincided with a nonviolent, human rights-based popular uprising, the regime was left with no viable chance for survival. In hindsight, the collapse may seem unsurprising, even expected, but at the time few people anticipated the state’s collapse and even the demonstrators themselves were largely content to demand reform, not revolution. But given other cases of nonviolent revolutions, such the shah’s Iran, Czechoslovakia in 1989, and Tunisia and Egypt in 2011, we should

perhaps not be amazed to find that seemingly invincible dictatorships can fall like houses of cards when their international support structures collapse.

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