



AT JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY

## November 9, 1989 – Memories from a Female Political Perspective

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For all East Germans, the fall of the Wall was certainly the most important event of the German postwar period. In 2009, twenty years later, this historical moment was celebrated at the Brandenburg Gate as an official and monumental celebration of freedom. Representatives of the peoples' movements were also invited to speak. These former participants delivered interesting reflections. However, even amidst diverse television coverage, I was unable to detect the presence of *Wendezeit* feminist activists on the screen. Therefore, allow me to share my experiences in the feminist movement surrounding the collapse of communism in this essay.

I have only vague memories of 9 November 1989 and the evening of the opening of the Wall. I was at home in the evening and put both of my sons, then fourteen and eight years old, to bed, followed by the customary ritual of clean-up and preparation for the following day. My husband came home late and we watched television. The official news came and then later, after a while, the unimaginable occurrence of the opening of the Wall and the jubilation of the people as they entered into the territory of West Berlin. What did this occurrence mean? Why did the Wall open now—and so abruptly? On that evening, I understood the fall of the Wall in various ways. However, I neither sensed that an end to the division of Germany as two German states was near, nor that the end of the division of the world in two large political blocs would come so quickly.

As I recall the collapse of communism, the opening of the Wall, and later to the process of unification, very specific events come to mind that are closely connected with my engagement and the activities of women in this time. I want to share these here and specifically share the basic democratic engagement of women in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and their activities—their tough struggle for influence in the course of political events—which all too often are forgotten in today's political establishment.

The historic events between the summer and fall of 1989 are well known. Here, I would like to recall only one event, which forever changed the situation following the Monday demonstrations in Leipzig and elsewhere: It was the large demonstration on 4 November 1989 in Berlin. As 500,000 people gathered on the city's Alexanderplatz—in response to the call of people engaged in the cultural sector—and demanded democracy, free rights, and reforms, it was clear: this movement could no longer be stopped. For the first time, members of the Socialist Unity Party (SED) and the establishment publicly aligned themselves with the critics. The appearance of Gregor Gysi, Lothar Bisky, and Markus Wolf, the head of the GDR Secret Police's Department of Foreign Intelligence, were most notable. They too demanded the democratization of socialism. Was this not a clear indication that the old political system could no longer continue?

Certainly, the signals were interpreted differently. One side viewed this as the final chance to renew the political system and create an open, free, and democratic society through democracy and consensus. And the other side, with the disposition and impression that the GDR was finished, wanted to finally leave the country and shed the sense of being entrapped in the GDR for an entire lifetime.

In my context it is important that this demonstration on 4 November 1989 in Berlin was the first time that the public demands of women were visible. In any event, women were active in all fractions and political planning of the demonstration. It was visible in the streets that they were there as individuals. Some demands calling attention to the discrimination of gender in the society were not publicly made until then. Signs with demands like "*Wir vertreten unsere Interessen selbst*" (We represent our interests ourselves) and "*Neue Frauen Braucht das Land*" (The country needs new women) at the demonstration on Alexanderplatz signaled a change in the dispositions among women.

At the latest, through the coverage of this demonstration, the GDR media, television, radio, and press also freed themselves from the constraints of censorship. It began a time of great public discussion. Already on 6 November, the only women's magazine in the GDR published an article written by leading GDR feminist researchers with the significant

title *“Geht die Erneuerung an uns Frauen vorbei?”* (Is the modernization passing us women?). The beginning of the text states that there was no public conscience regarding the real circumstances of women and their extensive exclusion from the important decision-making bodies of state, economic, and political powers. According to the authors, actual reforms and democracy, however, can only be achieved when the interests of the remaining half of the population are taken seriously and women themselves also represent those interests. That is why women then began to demand political concessions from the GDR leadership to act in the interest of women, and implement concrete measures such as an equal representation quota of men and women for all functions of the state and in politics at all levels.

On 6 November, the day that the article was published, a large demonstration took place outside of the political leadership's seat of power (where the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Federal Republic is presently located). Inside, in the powerful Central Committee building, the leaders met. Outside the building, individuals who thought that the country could be reformed and that freedom, democracy, and socialism could be brought together for the first time on German soil spoke before a large crowd. Speaker after speaker appeared, abstract societal models discussed. However, no women appeared behind the podium.

I went to this demonstration because I hoped that my problems would also be addressed here. Where were the women? Would men continue to abstractly debate [freedom and democracy] and the problems of women be absent from the discussion? Did we discuss, argue, and struggle through the mountain of free and feminist literature for this? Was it not already stated in the German feminist movement of the nineteenth century that *“es werden die vergessen sein, die an sich selbst zu denken vergaßen”* (those who will be forgotten are those who forget to think of themselves)? And so, unplanned but not coincidentally, I decided to take the microphone and speak. With regard to content, I spoke of the demands of the feminist researchers, the right of women to participate in power, and of self-determination. At the end of my speech I asked the women on the square directly: Isn't it time that women themselves publicly say what injustice and lack of political freedom mean? “Do you want to let others decide about our fate again?” And unexpected even by me, was the loud, supportive response from the square: No!

### **Without Women, No State Can Be Made**

After the demonstrations, official politicians responded with helpless changes in the political leadership of the state. Actions were instead dictated from the street.

As a result, the opening of the border came on the evening of 9 November 1989. With this action, the important and initial demand of the people's movement was fulfilled: freedom of travel.

Yet how should life in this country continue in the future? The most diverse groups attempted to give an answer to this question. Women did, too.

On 3 December 1989 approximately 1,200 women met in one of the largest theaters in East Germany. I was among them. This event was deemed as the unofficial founding event of the feminist movement of East Germany. An initiative committee had called for the founding of an independent association of women. The goal of the meeting was for different female groups and initiatives to become familiar with each other, facilitate coordination, and create their own interest agency. Above all else, one wanted to be part of important political and economic decisions, to avoid a *“Verschlechterung der sozialen Lage von Frauen”* (degradation of the social conditions of women), and prevent an *“erneuten Ausgrenzung”* (new ostracism) of female interests in the country's process of democratization.

It seems such a miracle; suddenly there was a feminist movement in the East. And it was immensely successful. Both of the movement's slogans were simple, clear, and right. The first new demand read *“Ohne Frauen ist kein Staat zu machen”* (Without women, no state can be made). And the other slogan of the association, *“Wer sich nicht wehrt, kommt an den Herd”* (One who fails to defend oneself will return to the stove) was the call to defend “achievements” made throughout history among GDR women (free childcare, professional lives for women, etc.) and the right of self-determination.

As utopian as the “manifest” of the meeting on 3 December was, so realistic were the descriptions of the experiences of women. With the founding of the independent women's association shortly thereafter, an instrument was established in short time and under immense pressure to yield female interests in the political process of the GDR's transformation. Both I and especially American authors later have contributed literature and countless articles on this process to become a relevant movement. Thus an effective female infrastructure with paid positions was developed, female representatives held positions in important state bodies and ministries in the interim government, and women contributed to the programmatic papers of the time (the constitutional draft and the social charter).

With the first free election in the GDR in spring 1990, all citizen movements of the East lost their functions that they had so successfully performed throughout the transformation process. The system of party democracy analogous to the West

German Federal Republic became more and more applicable to East Germans. Women had to reorient themselves and find their way within the new structure.

At the twentieth anniversary celebrations of the fall of the Wall, the media asked dozens of people what this event meant for them, how they view it today, and what aspects of their life have changed in the twenty years since. For me, it was a process of maturity and experience. Freedom was not given to the East Germans; they truly fought hard for it.

The feminist movement of the East, as it was developed then, no longer exists and can no longer exist. However, it left its positive mark beyond the process of unification. Directly, it was the influence of East German women in the process of German unity that resulted in the creation of a more or less practical provision for abortion for the entirety of Germany. This provision was highly contested. The new law to provide abortions was ultimately a compromise between supporters and opponents on the timing of a pregnancy's termination. An improvement for West German women, the new legislation was a setback for East German women because the new law dismissed specifically the recognition of the right of women's self-determination for themselves and their bodies. The East German Constitution had in contrast only just strengthened these rights (timing of a pregnancy's termination) of women and in doing so had fulfilled a previous demand of the 1920s German women's movement.

East German women's demand to have a right to work has certainly had a positive influence on the development of united Germany. Twenty years ago, working women were not a matter of course in West Germans' everyday lives. Since 1990, analysts have always speculated that eastern German women have a substantial influence on the high unemployment rate in the east. According to economic experts, with eastern German women's "*Arbeitsneigung*" (desire to work) only half as high, we would have an unemployment rate almost identical to that of the former West Germany. The adherence to and tough struggle for the preservation of kindergartens and full-day child care accommodations for school-aged children in the east has also been attacked. Liberal upbringing presupposes the upbringing of children solely in the family; kindergartens would produce deformed personalities, etc. Without difficulty, one could continue this list of criticisms against eastern German women.

In today's policies on women's issues, one sees how much the climate in the Federal Republic of Germany has changed in the last twenty years, largely due to the influence of East German experiences. And that influence extends beyond the level of political participation—the chancellor is a woman and women generally account for a third of elected officials at the national and regional parliamentary level. In my opinion, the biggest change has been the shift in public opinion on working mothers and the careers of women. Today, it is a conservative government that makes recommendations for equitable division of upbringing within young families. As such, children's upbringing is no longer solely a responsibility of women alone. In contrast, it is a stated goal to assist and support the quick and successful reentry of young mothers into their professional careers. To allow parents, specifically mothers, to maintain professional careers, a kindergarten spot is legally required to be available for children beginning at the age of three and subsidized through state tax funding.

*"Die Unzufriedenheit vieler Frauen mit dem Erreichten halte ich für optimistisch,"* (I consider the discontent of many women with their achievements as optimistic) wrote Maxi Wander, who, next to Christa Wolf, is certainly the most important icon of East German feminist literature. *"Konflikte werden uns erst bewusst, wenn wir uns leisten können, sie zu bewältigen. Unsere Lage als Frauen sehen wir differenzierter, seitdem wir die Gelegenheit haben, sie zu verändern."* (We only realize conflicts when we can overcome them. We view our conditions as women as differentiated, since we have the chance to change them).<sup>1</sup>

How true. The process surrounding 9 November 1989 brought East German women freedom, but also created new problems. For me, the existential experience of the process of transformation lies fundamentally in the experience of freedom, also understood as the possibility of change.

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<sup>1</sup> Maxi Wander, *Guten Morgen, du Schöne* (Berlin, 1980): 7-8.

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***AICGS is grateful to the Transatlantik-Programm der Bundesregierung der Bundesrepublik Deutschland aus Mitteln des European Recovery Program (ERP) des Bundesministeriums für Wirtschaft und Technologie (BMWi) and the Draeger Foundation for their generous support of this essay.***

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author alone.  
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