

‘We are the people’

Bernd Hagenkord SJ

As we prepare to mark the anniversary of the fall of the Berlin wall, German Jesuit Bernd Hagenkord recalls his memories of November 1989 and describes the momentous events that led to the reunification of Germany. To what extent did the Churches create a platform for the people of East Germany to find their voice, and how has the fall of the wall changed the way that Germans see themselves and their country?

Where were you when the wall came down? Where were you on 9 November 1989? I faintly remember sitting in the lecture halls in my first year at the University of Giessen, on the western side of the wall, trying to keep up with the developments. Before that day, nobody had believed in the opening of the wall. It had been there forever, at least for my generation, and was part of our internal landscape. After that date, we discussed the possibility of two Germanys, of a confederation, of step-by-step integration, of things to be rescued from the failing state in the East. We got it all wrong. We had no idea what was happening and we tried to keep up by applying outmoded western concepts to a reality we could not grasp.

Perhaps we knew instinctively even then what it would cost us westerners, not only in terms of money, but in terms of comfort; that the cocoon in which we had grown up, looking after ourselves and staying away from all the problems and conflicts outside, would no longer protect us.

Before the fall

Speaking as a westerner with no ties to the other side, the change completely surprised me. Growing up as I did after the building of the wall, the two Germanys were a reality. Politicians, especially conservative ones, still paid lip service to the nation undivided, and some of them might even have believed it, but the vast

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majority could not have cared less about it. And with good reason. The wall not only divided the country and imprisoned the population of the East, it was also a symbol for a peaceful and comfortable Germany. Germany was culpable for the Second World War and for unspeakable atrocities. German militarism lay at the root of violence in the decades before that. But after the war, Germany and its *Wirtschaftswunder*, the ‘economic

miracle’, provided an atmosphere of economic power without political responsibility. And not only did we feel comfortable, as we can see from the files of the [recently opened archives](#) in London and Paris, but at least some of our politicians were happy with the wall and the division, because it kept us Germans at bay.

Talk of one nation undivided carried the rhetoric of the early, post-war years of the Federal republic. Those moralising, patronising politicians of the early years, suspected of hiding their membership cards of the NSDAP (the National Socialist, or Nazi Party), not having come to terms with their past; those men of yesterday still used the rhetoric, so we thought. And all the while there were still the displaced persons, living out their bourgeois customs and costumes, yearning for a past and a *Heimat* (home/homeland) long gone; they talked about Schlesien and Pommern, and all the parts that now were the German Democratic Republic (GDR – East Germany) and Poland.

For whole generations, the wall was an abomination, but it was reality. We sent presents over to friends we knew, we visited East Berlin with its ridiculous money and the funny yet frightening state. But it was not our Germany.

Our Germany – that is, West Germany – was peaceful. We kept to ourselves, safe in NATO and the EU, not too powerful on the international stage but at least not at war. The eastern part of the country had to pay the price, of course, but what did we know? It was a comfortable existence without ties to the problematic spots elsewhere on the globe. We could be a rich country without having to worry about the responsibility that normally comes with that privilege. No wonder we did not understand what was happening on the other side of the wall in Berlin and Leipzig, and before that in Prague, Budapest, Krakow and Gdansk.

Prayer and politics

Poland, with its long history of Catholic and union opposition, opened the movement for freedom. It was the Catholic Church, *Solidarność* ('Solidarity', the Polish trade union), Bishop Wyszyński and Pope John Paul II who eventually became the driving force of change. Prague and Budapest followed suit. In Eastern Germany, it was the Protestant Church that provided the spaces where the discontented could form a critical mass that would eventually tear down the wall. Yes, it was among other things a religiously motivated change. But more than anything else, religion provided the space where the opposition could emerge. It was a breathing space, a place with some degree of freedom from first Stalinism and then the bureaucratic oppression of the socialist states.

The state had invaded nearly every part of life. The *Stasi*, the secret and omnipresent political police in East Germany, had turned about one quarter of the population into informers about the rest. They called them 'IM's (unofficial collaborators) and the files on them continue to cost a lot of people their political careers today. Miles and miles of files filled police cellars. The film *The Lives of Others* paints a vivid, if slightly trivialised picture of the life under the *Stasi*, trivialising because the *Stasi* also had huge hospital-prisons where dissenters were subjected to psychological and medical treatment.

At first the churches were breathing spaces: not all of them, not everywhere, but the only chance to find a bit of space as a normal, non-intellectual and non-famous person, was in these church meetings. These were not revolutionaries, they were people who kept to their faith despite the disadvantages that came with it: marginalisation, being blocked from promotion at work, their children not being allowed to study, the suspicion or even the knowledge of being surrounded by IMs who posed as friends. The churches became the place to assemble, to talk about social, political and environmental problems and formulate them as prayers.

These communities came into conflict with the state, and also sometimes with the hierarchy of the Protestant Church. However, the state was already hollow and could do nothing against the developing discontent. A war of words broke out over the shape of the economy, with the ruling elite clinging to their power, giving speeches on the future of socialism while living in their luxury quarters outside Berlin. They were pathetic, really, dangerous and evil, but pathetic.

Gradually the prayers – for peace, for free elections, naming injustices – turned into political meetings, without losing their Christian basis. And when the churches became too small, the people took to the streets. There was little resistance from the state. There was no dictator at the centre suppressing everything, as had been the case with the protests in Berlin in 1953, in Budapest in 1956 and in Prague in 1968, just bureaucrats passing themselves off as statesmen. And the bureaucrats had no means of fighting against the demonstrations leaving the churches and marching through the streets every Monday, first in Leipzig, then in other cities.

That was the great contribution of the Churches in the East: space for political, social, economical and environmental concerns; prayers that cared about the real lives of real people; communities of faith not afraid to try to change the world. And they not only shocked their state, they also shocked us, the West. Our Churches were just like the state: comfortable, rich (because of the Church-tax system) and not really revolutionary. That movement faded and today the number of Christians in the East has dropped dramatically: whole areas have no idea about Church

and a whole generation has grown up not knowing the meaning of that man on the wooden cross.

But for the years before the fall of the wall and during the dramatic days in November 1989, the faithful joined hands to change the world.

'Wir sind das Volk'

'*Wir sind das Volk*' – 'we are the people': that shout opened it all up. It points to the heart of the problem of the late GDR: a total lack of legitimacy. Once the system was challenged it had no means to fight back. The dramatic events of October and November 1989 are worth a longer story, but the long and short of it is that ultimately they were unavoidable. The people claiming back their lives and their society broke the state that was built to control them.

But the cry, '*Wir sind das Volk*' also did something else: it put the German people back in the limelight. Until very recently, some politicians like Mikhail Gorbachev, Helmut Kohl and George Bush Sr were talking about this moment in history as if it was their doing, this opportunity for the German people. Kohl even named his book: *I wanted German unity*, painting a picture of himself as the *Kanzler der Einheit* – the chancellor of reunification. But it was the people who started it. 3 October 1990, when Germany was officially reunited, was the politicians' day; 9 November 1989 was the people's day.

Acting as a collective again was something that had been inconceivable in West Germany. *Volk* sounded like Nazi terminology and nationalism, something we had not heard in years. But the Germans on the other side of the wall were not afraid to use it. It was their legitimisation: being one *Volk* ('nation' does not give the full meaning of that term) provided the right to stand up, to claim ownership of one's life and of political participation.

Celebrate and remember

And since then? We have tried to rediscover a German identity, not really knowing what that identity would be. *Volk* went out of fashion quickly. The quest for a soul became visible, especially in Berlin where old buildings were re-erected. Germany is trying to build itself a past. There is the royal

palace in the centre of Berlin, which was destroyed to make way for the parliament of the GDR: it is to be rebuilt in a more modern fashion as a conference centre and museum. But again, there is no new concept of what a modern Germany could look like, just versions of the old, adapted to consumerism or rebuilt to house the Berlin departments of the big corporations. Berlin is a real example of the search for a centre. We Germans do not know what that would be. During the separation we did not have one, and now? A centre to represent Germany? Representation for what, exactly?

What is it that we celebrate these days? It is the courage of those people who brought down the unjust states, and also the disappearance of the cosy and comfortable life of the West, and the demise of the oppression of the East. But what there is instead, we are not quite sure. Come to think of it, this is not bad news. Overcoming the tensions with Poland; settling into a stable role in the EU community; welcoming others, especially outsiders like Turkey into this union, and people from Asia and Africa into our country: none of this would have worked had we still been building walls around and within our country. Germany started to change and I am sure the change is not over yet. This is what I would like to call good news.

The beginning of this process was marked by the famous words of Ronald Reagan, spoken in Berlin: 'Mr Gorbachev, tear down this wall'. Remembering the freedom that came with the events of twenty years ago, and remembering the time before it and the reasons for it, this is my personal project: keeping doors open and walls down. That can make one uncomfortable and unsure of whether one's own community of faith really supports the efforts made, but it is worth it. Why? Because there are still people on the other side of the wall. Because my own life needs to be shaken a bit. And because I cannot deny the fact that my faith asks this of me, even if we do not know what is next and what our life will look like after this.

Bernd Hagenkord SJ was born in 1968 in Westfalia, West Germany. After studying theology at Heythrop College, University of London from 1999-2002, he spent six years in Hamburg as a youth minister. He is now head of the German language department of Vatican Radio.