

# INTRODUCTION:

## Prelude to Revolution

*Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it. Begin it now.*

—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust*

In fall 1989, millions of television viewers throughout the world watched night after night, transfixed, as the people took to the streets in East Germany. Few could imagine the momentous events that would change the course of world history before the year's end. On November 9, 1989, the Berlin Wall fell, and East Germans streamed into West Berlin and West Germany. The world had changed.

Most of us know this part of the story. We know that the Wall had symbolized the division of Berlin, Germany, Europe, and the world into two hostile blocs. The Wall stood as the flash point of the Cold War, arguably the defining epoch of the twentieth century, with the United States and its NATO allies on the one side—the west—and the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact member countries on the other—the east. When the Berlin Wall fell, it signified the beginning of the end of communist control in Eastern Europe and set in motion actions that would end the Cold War.

But what many don't know is where that story begins—and that this major world change had its humble origins in a small group of activists not from Berlin but from the city of Leipzig, East Germany's second largest city about 100 miles south of Berlin.

During the first half of 1989, various Leipzig groups staged a series of small-scale public protests to highlight their demands for democratic reforms and to gain more supporters for their causes. Activists in Leipzig came from about twenty groups, most organized originally under the protective roof of the church,<sup>3</sup> the only non-state-affiliated organization allowed any, if limited, freedom to operate in East Germany. Later these groups moved away from the church, challenging the state from the streets. Following the model of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Leipzig activists practiced nonviolence and promoted peaceful change.

Most group members were tied to like-minded “alternative thinkers” in other cities in East Germany and saw themselves as part of peace, environmental, or human rights movements. Some groups focused on study and discussion, while others focused on action. Some groups worked openly, others conspiratorially. Only a handful of the groups were self-consciously oppositional, but as the year progressed, members from other groups increasingly joined in activities and demonstrations that challenged the position of the state.

These activists achieved the rights and freedoms they desired by acting as if those rights already existed. When they met illegally, they exercised freedom of association. They joined together in unauthorized demonstrations to promote freedom of assembly. They published illicit samizdat<sup>4</sup> materials to promote freedom of the press and freedom of information. They spoke out at unsanctioned gatherings and sang and played at unauthorized festivals to promote freedom of expression, free speech.

This small group of committed activists dreamed of a better East Germany, a better political system, a better world. But they did not stop with dreams. They strategized, organized, and worked to turn their dreams into reality, and by autumn 1989 their small-scale protests promoting democratic reforms had grown to massive demonstrations involving hundreds of thousands and ultimately brought down the state.



Leipzig seemed an unlikely venue for political opposition and revolution. A city of slightly more than 500,000 inhabitants in 1989, Leipzig’s population was a little more than half the population of Berlin. Leipzig had not fared well under almost forty years of communism. As an industrial center and one of the most polluted cities in East Germany and Eastern Europe, Leipzig had air that burned eyes and nostrils. Chemicals spewed from nearby Espenhain’s oil, gas, and mining industries. Sewage ran through the canals of the Weisse Elster, the Pleisse, and the Parthe Rivers, making Leipzig’s water unfit to drink.

The once proud city of Goethe, Schiller, Bach, and other great German writers and musicians, Leipzig in the post- World War II period had been devastated by neglect. Berliners, with access to the perks of power and influence, generally fared much better economically than Leipzigers. As the capital and showplace of communist East Germany, Berlin had received most of the money for building and renovation. For Leipzigers, only traces remained of better years in earlier times, like concerts at St. Thomas Church by the world-renowned boys’ choir, founded in the year 1212, or meals at Auerbach’s Keller (cellar), the restaurant made famous by Goethe’s Faust and still patronized by Leipzigers

and visitors from throughout the world. Almost all commercial buildings and apartments in Leipzig suffered from deferred maintenance, and abandoned buildings dotted the landscape.



Thomas Church, home of the world-renowned boys' choir  
founded in 1212  
*Photo by Patricia Smith*

3. Most groups in East Germany developed under the auspices of the Evangelical (Protestant) Church, a church body that combined both Lutheran and Reformed (Calvinist) traditions. The German word *evangelisch* means "Protestant" and does not have the connotation of proselytizing generally associated with evangelical churches in the United States. The East German Evangelical Church had more than 5,000,000 members, the vast majority of the slightly more than 6 million East Germans who claimed religious affiliation. (Pedro Ramet, "Religious Distribution in Eastern Europe," lecture at University of Washington, Seattle: 26 January 1989.) See Chapters 3 and 6 as well as Robert F. Goeckel, *The Lutheran Church and the East German State: Political Conflict and Change under Ulbricht and Honecker* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990) for more information regarding churches in East Germany.
4. *Samizdat* referred to the government-censored literature and other information reproduced clandestinely by dissident groups throughout Eastern Europe. Activists copied the material by hand or with typewriters using carbon paper and distributed the material through friends and other underground contacts.