East German protest emigration and Hungarian solidarity, 1989


August 19, 1989
to: September 11, 1989

Country: Germany
Country: Hungary
Location City/State/Province: Sopron, Hungary

Goals:
To remove the “Iron Curtain” in Hungary which restricted cross-border movements from Eastern European/Communist countries to Western European/capitalist countries

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 070. Protest emigration (hijrat)
- 147. Deliberate inefficiency and selective noncooperation by enforcement agents
- 174. Establishing new social patterns → Pan-European Picnic

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 070. Protest emigration (hijrat)
- 147. Deliberate inefficiency and selective noncooperation by enforcement agents

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 070. Protest emigration (hijrat)
- 147. Deliberate inefficiency and selective noncooperation by enforcement agents

Methods in 4th segment:

- 070. Protest emigration (hijrat)
- 147. Deliberate inefficiency and selective noncooperation by enforcement agents

Methods in 5th segment:
• 070. Protest emigration (hijrat)
• 147. Deliberate inefficiency and selective noncooperation by enforcement agents

Methods in 6th segment:

• 070. Protest emigration (hijrat)
• 147. Deliberate inefficiency and selective noncooperation by enforcement agents

Classifications

Classification:
Change

Cluster:
Democracy
Human Rights

Group characterization:

• 661 ordinary East German citizens
• Hungarian reformers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
A small group of Hungarian reformers associated with (illegal) opposition parties and the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF); the group created a “Pan-European Picnic” organizing committee.

Partners:
Pan-European Union, a non-governmental organization whose president was Otto Habsburg

External allies:
Undersecretary of State of Hungary, Mayor of Sopron, chief of Frontier Guard for that area.

Involvement of social elites:
Mayor of Sopron, Otto Habsburg (son of last Emperor of Austria and King of Hungary and currently president of the Pan-European Union), Undersecretary of State of government of Hungary.

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

• Mayor of Sopron
• Otto Habsburg
• Pan-European Union
• Undersecretary of State of government of Hungary
• chief of Frontier Guard for that area

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:
Groups in 5th Segment:
Groups in 6th Segment:
Segment Length: Approximately 4 days

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
East German and Hungarian governments

Nonviolent responses of opponent:
Not known

Campaigner violence:
Not known

Repressive Violence:
Not known

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:
6 points out of 6 points

Survival:
1 point out of 1 points

Growth:
3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:
On September 11 the Hungarian government opened all its borders for citizens of East Germany (the German Democratic Republic) for good. Over 13,000 East Germans crossed to Austria and on to West Germany.

“The pulling down of the Berlin Wall began in Sopron,” stated Lothar de Maiziere, East Germany’s last prime minister.

On the outskirts of Sopron, a small town on the border between Communist Hungary and democratic Austria, they had a picnic – a most unusual picnic. The organizers wanted to “act out the future in the present.”

Tired of the Iron Curtain, that heavily guarded, electrified fence that separated Communist East Europe from capitalist West Europe, some Hungarian reformers decided to hold a picnic on both sides of the border and invite thousands of Austrians and Hungarians to come and mingle.

They called it a Pan-European Picnic. Because Hungary was at that time liberalizing, the reformers used their connections into the circle of powerholders to get permission to cut the Iron Curtain near the town of Sopron. Sponsorship was gained from the Pan-European Union, a non-governmental organization run by Otto Habsburg, the son of the last Emperor of Austria and King of Hungary, and the committee got the Hungarian Undersecretary of State to be a headline speaker.

Music and food were organized for thousands of people for the August 19 event and the Sopon Mayor was delighted. The border guard unit was primed to be ready to cut the fence for the three-hour picnic and to check the passes of the Austrians and Hungarians who flowed back and forth to eat, chat, and listen to music and speeches.

The unexpected “guests.”” While the picnic was being organized pressure for democracy was mounting in the Communist German Democratic Republic (GDR, often called “East Germany”). Although the committee members publicized the picnic far
and wide (including to Germany), they were surprised to find hundreds of East Germans showing up. (It was fairly easy for citizens to travel from one Communist country to another, as long as they stayed behind the Iron Curtain.) Committee members were even more surprised to find the East Germans crossing to the Austrian side with every intention of escaping to freedom! The committee members silently cheered them on while busily reassuring the officials and keeping the music and speakers going. In spare moments they tried to reassure each other that prison would probably be the worst they could expect for what was happening.

The border guards stood aside. Regulations state that border guards should shoot to kill if necessary to prevent people from Iron Curtain countries from fleeing. The guards checked the passports of the Austrians who patiently stood in line to cross the border and participate in the picnic, while an estimated 600 East Germans walked around the Austrians and guards and crossed the border without challenge. The fence was repaired as expected when the picnic ended.

For the next few days the Hungarian government responded to this local surprise by tightening the border patrols along the Austrian border, but East Germans continued to come into Hungary and Hungarian reformers increased their pressure for opening the border. On September 11 Hungary opened its border and an estimated 13,000 East Germans flowed through Hungary into Austria and on to West Germany.

Back in East Germany massive demonstrations for democracy grew through September. Government leader Erich Honecker was replaced in October by a slightly more liberal Communist but people power continued to mount. To reduce the pressure for democracy the East German government itself opened a few sections of the Berlin Wall, allowing heightened protest emigration: East Germans poured into West Berlin. Overwhelmed by the nonviolent action of East Germans, the governing Communist Party resigned.

Research Notes

Influences:

Sources:


“Pan-European Picnic,” Wikipedia.

“East Germany,” Wikipedia


Additional Notes:
The context was increasing public opposition to the Iron Curtain, an electrified, heavily guarded fence where many had been killed trying to escape over the years. The picnic committee advertised the picnic far and wide (including in East Germany) but did not actually expect the protest emigration to happen at its picnic, although the committee supported it once the 600 East Germans showed up – at considerable risk to themselves.

“The pulling down of the Berlin Wall began in Sopron,” stated Lothar de Maiziere, East Germany’s last prime minister.
The route East Germans typically took was: crossing the "green" border via Czechoslovakia into Hungary, then on to Austria and West Germany.

Edited by Max Rennebohm (22/06/2011)
Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:
George Lakey, 17/08/2008

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