East Germans protest for democracy (The Peaceful Revolution), 1988-90

-
Soviet Bloc Independence Campaigns (1989-1991)

January
1988
to: March
1990

Country: Germany
Location Description: *The German Democratic Republic (East Germany) at the time*

Goals:
The overarching goal was to overthrow the Communist government in the German Democratic Republic, reunify Germany and establish a shared participatory democracy.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 4th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 121. Refusal of public support
- 124. Boycott of elections › voting "no" and crossing out ballots

Methods in 5th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 004. Signed public statements
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 020. Prayer and worship
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 070. Protest emigration (hijrat)
- 121. Refusal of public support
- 125. Boycott of government employment and positions › Resignation of government officials
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast) › while in prison

Methods in 6th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 121. Refusal of public support
- 173. Nonviolent occupation

Classifications

Classification:
Change
Cluster:
Democracy

Group characterization:

- Citizens of East Germany

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
Initiative für Frieden und Menschenrechte (Initiative for Peace and Human Rights); Barbel Bohley, Robert Havermann and Neues Forum (New Forum); Demokratie Jetzt (Democracy Now); Rainer Eppelman and Demokratischer Aufbruch (Democratic Awakening); Bündnis '90 (Alliance 90); Sozialdemokratische Partei in der DDR (Social-Democractic Party in the German Democratic Republic)
Partners:
Evangelical and Protestant Churches
External allies:
Not known
Involvement of social elites:
Assorted GDR Governmental Officials

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Initiative für Frieden und Menschenrechte

Groups in 2nd Segment:
Groups in 3rd Segment:
Groups in 4th Segment:
Groups in 5th Segment:
Groups in 6th Segment:

- Demokratie Jetzt
- Demokratischer Aufbruch
- Evangelical and Protestant Churches
- GDR Governmental Officials
- Neues Forum
- Sozialdemokratische Partei in der DDR

Segment Length: *Approximately 4.5 months*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
The government of East Germany, the Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (Socialist Unity Party), and by extension, the government of the Soviet Union in Moscow.
Nonviolent responses of opponent:
Not known
Campaigner violence:

Not known
Repressive Violence:
There are limited documented cases of East German police violently confronting protesters, especially during the early months of the campaign.

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

In 1988, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) had been under Soviet rule for more than 40 years, and the Berlin Wall had stood erect for nearly 30. Strict Socialist rule meant extreme limits on speech and action. Travel outside the country was prohibited, and many East German citizens were separated from family and friends living in West Germany. Dissenters to government of the GDR and Soviet rule led small protests throughout the years of Soviet rule, though in great fear of punishment from the Stasi, the secret police of the GDR. Thousands fled through Czechoslovakia, but in 1989 the GDR government closed the border between the GDR and Czechoslovakia, leading those who might have left to rise up.

A new wave of organizers and protesters emerged in 1988, energized by burgeoning pro-democracy movements beginning in other Soviet countries and motivated by the slow tightening of regulations. Protesters began their first action under this new wave on January 17, 1988, when an annual memorial march for two Marxist revolutionaries in Berlin turned into a full-scale demonstration for human rights and democracy. The march, an annual observance held by unknown citizens, transformed into a demonstration after a few protesters joined the march, chanting slogans, and others were moved to join. Over 100 people were arrested for displaying radical slogans and symbols. Small scale protests, marches, displays of banners and German flags, and arrests continued to emerge over the next year, but nothing was large enough to attract serious international attention or governmental concern.

In May 1989 the annual municipal elections were held. This was only a formality as the same, pre-determined ticket was confirmed each year. Those who didn't vote promptly received personal reminders from members of the Stasi. However, in the days leading up to the elections, activists distributed pamphlets urging citizens to "vote no," or to cross out the entire ballot as a documentation of their rejection of the Socialist party. Thousands did so, and when the party officials announced that 98.5% of the population had confirmed the Socialist ticket, it was clear that the election had been tampered with.

On September 4, 1989, after a weekly prayer for peace at the church in Leipzig, people began holding rallies and protests against the government of the GDR. With the confidence that the Lutheran Church supported their resistance and would do its best to protect them, these demonstrations began to accompany the weekly prayers, swelling in size as groups emerged to better organize the growing resistance.

Groups around the country rapidly duplicated the actions of the protesters in Leipzig, and the weekly rallies became known as the "Monday Night Demonstrations." A month after the initial rally, a few hundred protesters had become 70,000. A week later, on October 16, there were 120,000. The next week, there were 320,000 people demonstrating in Leipzig alone, and groups of citizens held protests at churches across the country. It was during this period that resistance groups experienced enough popular support to go public with their ideas and materials.

The Initiative für Frieden und Menschenrechte (Initiative for Peace and Human rights) joined with Neues Forum (New Forum),

Demokratie Jetzt (Democracy Now), and Demokratischer Aufbruch (Democratic Awakening), among others, to support and organize the swelling popular movement. Together, they published "Initiative '89", a pamphlet/petition outlining their vision for a unified German democracy. During this period, there were other mass displays of unrest and resistance, including hunger strikes in prisons.

On November 4, over a million people gathered in East Berlin, chanting, singing and waving banners, to call for the end to the Socialist Regime. On November 9, the East German government announced the opening of the border, allowing free travel in and out of the state. In the following days, citizens took sledgehammers to the Berlin Wall, and it was removed over the following months. After the barrier between East and West Germany was removed, East German political officials resigned in mass protest, both of the Socialist government, and as part of the mass movement towards democracy. In December, citizens peacefully occupied the buildings that housed the Stasi across the country, officially reclaiming a democratic governance of their society. With newly free borders, East Germans poured into the West, and continued to demonstrate. In December of 1989, the leader of the Socialist Unity Party, Egon Krenz, resigned, and the party itself disintegrated. In March of 1990, the first multi-party, democratic elections were held, and the demonstrations ceased, their goal fully accomplished.

Research Notes

Influences:

Other campaigns in the wave of Eastern Europe Democracy Campaigns (1989) (1,2).
Sources:
Cordell, Karl. "The Role of the Evangelical Church in the GDR." Government and Opposition 25.1 (1990): 48-59.

Dale, Gareth. The East German Revolution of 1989. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2006. Print.

Mueller, Carol. "Claim "Radicalization?" The 1989 Protest Cycle in the GDR*." Society for the Study of Social Problems 46.4 (2010): 528-547.

Opp, Karl-dieter, and Christiane Gern. "Dissident Groups , Personal Networks , and Spontaneous Cooperation : The East German Revolution of 1989." The American Sociological Association 58.5 (2010): 659-680.

Pfaff, Steven. "Collective Identity and Informal Groups in Revolutionary Mobilization: East Germany in 1989." Social Forces 75.1 (1996): 91.

Schonsee, Reinhart, and Gerda Lederer. "The Gentle Revolution." Political Psychology 12.2 (1991): 309.

See also: Ackerman, Peter and Jack Duvall. A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000.
Additional Notes:
Also see "East German protest emigration and Hungarian solidarity, 1989"
Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:
Hanna King, 10/10/2010

Original website design and artwork created by Daniel Hunter.
Permissions beyond the scope of this license may be available at http://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu .

Registered users can login to the website.