Chronicle of the Leipzig Monday Demonstrations

The famous Monday demonstrations, which started in Leipzig and spread to other East German cities in the fall of 1989, grew out of the East German peace movement that started in the early 1980s. East German churches - especially the Lutheran Church - were somewhat autonomous from state and party and had the right to host public gatherings. People who did not agree with the policies or political ideas of the state welcomed the open doors that the church offered, and it became an important place for public exchange and political discussion. The Nikolaikirche (St. Nicholas Church) in Leipzig, the Gethsemanekirche (Gethsemane Church) in Berlin and many other East German churches thus played an important part in the peaceful revolution of 1989.

Christian Führer – the pastor at Leipzig’s Nikolaikirche from 1980 to 2008 – had organized events on the occasion of the Friedensdekade that was concurrently inaugurated by East and West German church groups in 1980. Every Monday evening since September 20, 1982, Führer had offered prayers for peace against the arms race in East and West and opened his church to non-religious people. The Monday prayer meetings became increasingly political, as independent political groups and individuals who were in opposition to the state and critical of the system, or who wanted to leave the GDR, joined the meetings. The state – especially the Stasi (secret police) – kept a close watch on these meetings and, in fall 1988, they put pressure on church leadership to prohibit independent groups from creating new content for prayers. These groups, however, protested the de-politicization of the prayers, and shortly after the rigged national elections in May 1989, they organized a demonstration in Leipzig. The next day, during the prayers for peace, the police cordoned off the church.

Chronology of Events

1989

April - Hungarian border troops start to dismantle the border between Hungary and Austria at four places; this top-secret project is officially announced on May 2, 1989.

June 27 - The Hungarian-Austrian border opens. Approximately 65,000 East Germans travel to Hungary, where they wait to continue on to Austria.

Early August - GDR citizens flee to West German embassies in Budapest, Prague and Warsaw.

Sept 10 - At midnight, the Hungarian government announces that East Germans may leave Hungary for Austria.

Sept 12 - The East German civil rights movement Demokratie Jetzt (Democracy Now) announces its founding.

Sept 19 - The civil rights group Neues Forum (New Forum) applies to become an officially-recognized association.
Sept 4 - Monday evening prayers for peace at Leipzig’s Nikolaikirche. Afterwards, approximately 1,000 people gather in front of the church and make demands, such as “Stasi, get out!” and “Free travel, instead of the flight of masses!” The call “We want to go!” changes into “We’re staying here!” This is the start of the Monday demonstrations that quickly spread to all major cities in the GDR.


Sept 25 - Over 8,000 people join the Leipzig Monday demonstration.

Sept 30 - Refugees camped out in the West German embassy in Prague and Warsaw, are allowed to travel to West Germany through the GDR.

Oct 2 - In Leipzig, 20,000 people demonstrate for reforms. Beginning of a series of vigils for East German political prisoners held at the Gethsemanekirche in Berlin.

Oct 2 - Founding of Demokratischer Aufbruch (Democratic Awakening), an oppositional political movement.

Oct 4 - Sealed trains with East German refugees from Prague on their way to West Germany pass through Dresden, inciting people to riot.

Oct 7 - The GDR celebrates its 40th anniversary. Protests on Alexanderplatz in Berlin meet with violent repression and the arrest of 1,047 protesters. Demonstrations in Leipzig, Magdeburg, Dresden and Karl Marx Stadt (Chemnitz) as well.

Oct 7 - Founding of the Sozialdemokratische Partei der DDR (Social Democratic Party of East Germany).

Oct 9 - Leipzig witnesses its largest protest since the June 1953 East German workers’ uprising. In the mouths of 70,000, the chant “We are the people!” becomes one of the central slogans of the peaceful revolution of 1989. On alert are 8,000 security forces, hospitals and doctors.

Early in the day, six Leipzig celebrities – including conductor Kurt Masur, theologian Peter Zimmermann, and cabaret artist Bernd-Lutz Lange, as well as three SED district secretaries, Dr. Kurt Meyer, Jochen Pommert and Dr. Roland Wötzelt – draft a call for non-violent protest, fearing an escalation of violence. Kurt Masur reads the call over the city radio station at the start of the demonstration. In addition, Christian Führer, the pastor of the Nikolaikirche, superintendent Friedrich Magirius and Bishop Johannes Hempel help to ensure the peaceful course of the demonstration.

In an interview, Christian Führer recalls: On October 9, there were about 600 SED comrades and Stasi members among the 2,000 participants in the prayers for peace. Outside was a contingent of the army, as well as police and civilian defense forces. The prayers were held in an atmosphere of incredible quiet and concentration. At the end, an urgent appeal for non-violence was made. When we came out of the church with more than 2,000 people – I’ll never forget the sight – there were tens of thousands of people waiting on the square. They all held candles in their hands. “Non-violence” was literally taken out of the church and put into practice in the street.
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Oct 11 - The East German politburo announces it will engage in discussion.

Oct 13 - Party leaders do not challenge Erich Honecker during their meeting with him. Almost all demonstrators who were arrested in Berlin on October 7 are set free.

Oct 16 - The Monday demonstration numbers 120,000 protesters in Leipzig; military forces on alert.

Oct 18 - Erich Honecker resigns, and Egon Krenz becomes the new Secretary-General of the SED. The daily TV news program Aktuelle Kamera finally starts reporting on the domestic crisis.

Oct 24 - Egon Krenz is elected Chairman of the State Council.

Oct 25 - Leipzig protesters number 320,000. In Leipzig, the demonstrations continue until March 1990, shortly before the first free elections take place.

Nov 3 - East German citizens are allowed to leave for West Germany via Czechoslovakia; 45,000 people leave in the first four days. In all of 1989, 343,000 East German citizens will have left the GDR for West Germany.

Nov 4 - Almost one million people participate in a mass demonstration on Berlin’s Alexanderplatz. Intellectuals and artists call for reforms and democracy. People’s Police forces declare their alliance with the demonstrators.

Nov 7 - The East German government resigns; the SED Central Committee unanimously re-elects Krenz as Secretary-General.

Nov 8 - On East German television, author Christa Wolf reads her text entitled “We need you!” and asks GDR citizens to remain in their country, promising a more democratic socialism.

Nov 9 - An unintentional televised announcement is made by Günter Schabowski (a member of the SED Politburo) that East Germany’s borders are open.

Nov 28 - West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl presents his 10-step-plan for German reunification.

Dec 7 - Upon the initiative of Demokratie Jetzt, the Central Round Table meets for the first time. Participating are important political groups, representatives of the church, public figures, intellectuals, new political parties and members of the civil rights movement. The Central Round Table influences many decisions made by the government led by Hans Modrow and continues to function until the March 1990 national elections.

1990

Jan 15 - Stasi headquarters in Berlin are stormed.

Feb 8 - A commission is appointed for the dissolution of the Stasi.

Mar 18 - First free elections held in the GDR. The CDU wins the national elections.
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Apr 19 - GDR Prime Minister Lothar de Mazière announces in his government declaration that unification is the most important task.

July 1 - Currency Union; the (West) German mark replaces the East mark.

Oct 3 - The GDR is annexed into the Federal Republic of Germany, under a provision of the West German Basic Constitutional Law.

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1 See: www.jugendopposition.de
2 Katrin Arnholz, Peaceful Revolution – An Interview with Christian Führer. February 2009.

Text and compiled facts by the DEFA Film Library at the University of Massachusetts Amherst

Sources:
- www.chronikderwende.de
- www.jugendopposition.de