



Women as actors in the upheavals of 1989/90
Presentation by Marina Grasse
(shortened version)

There were many women who entered the political stage during the period of upheaval of the GDR (the German Democratic Republic) in 1989/90 and who helped to set into motion the “revolution from below”. The majority of these actors had already become politically active in various opposition groups in the 1980s and were co-founders of the civic movements set up in the fall of 1989.

The first part of this presentation will refer to socio-political contexts and non-state actor groups from the period before 1989, while the second part will focus on the dynamics from 1989/90 up to the day the GDR acceded to the jurisdiction of the FRG's (Federal Republic of Germany's) Grundgesetz (Constitution) on 3 October 1990. Starting in 1990, these dynamics were largely co-determined by external actor groups.

Actor groups in the 1980s

Despite, or perhaps because of, the relatively high standard of living compared to other Eastern Bloc countries, the dissatisfaction of the people in the GDR grew in the 1980s. Their lack of individual liberty, freedom of the press, democratic basic rights, as well as the progress of socialism constantly heralded by party and state leadership had increased the distance to the state to the point of estrangement for many people. The party and state leadership feared that reforms could get out of hand and ultimately challenge the party's single predominance.

The emigration movement

By signing the CSCE Final Act in 1975, the GDR had committed itself to respecting human rights and fundamental freedoms. This also included freedom of travel and emigration. From 1977 onwards, GDR citizens were able to apply for an emigration permit. Between 1961 and 1988, more than 380,000 people officially left the GDR, about 222,000 people left the GDR by routes of escape, prisoner trade or not returning to the GDR from an approved visit to the West. The waves of emigration had dramatic consequences, especially through the devastating loss of well-trained skilled workers and academics. Although felt by everyone throughout the entire GDR, these consequences were neither publicly mentioned nor discussed.

The peace, human rights, and environmental movement critical of the state

Another counter-movement that was important for the upheavals and changes of 1989 emerged in the early 1980s with the peace, human rights and environmental groups that were critical of the system and independent of the state. Many women and men emerging from these groups founded civic movements and new parties from autumn 1989 onwards.

Similar to the Federal Republic, the GDR also saw the emergence of a peace movement independent of the state, which opposed any form of rearmament and militarization. In particular, the Protestant Church and its congregations played a key role in its emergence, work and development.

The first peace groups in Berlin were formed in the parish of Alt-Pankow (with Pastor Ruth Misselwitz) and the Samaritan parish (with Pastor Reiner Eppelmann). Further peace groups were established in the early 1980s in other cities of the GDR such as Halle, Erfurt, Jena, Dresden and Leipzig.

After the failure of the peace movement and the beginning of the stationing of modernized medium-range missiles in both German states, new groups were formed from 1983 onwards. They linked the issue of peace more closely with human rights and environmental problems, referring above all to the Final Act of the CSCE. The issue of human rights, which was extremely sensitive for the party and state leadership, increasingly directed the vigilance and destructive efforts of the state security organs towards those human rights groups that they considered to be particularly "negative and hostile". In Berlin, these groups included the "Frieden und Menschenrechte" ("Peace and Human Rights") initiative, the group "Gegenstimmen" ("Countervoices"), the "Kirche von unten" ("Church from Below"), the Berliner Umweltbibliothek (Berlin Environmental Library), the group "Absage an Praxis und Prinzip der Ausgrenzung" ("Rejection of the Practice and Principle of Exclusion") and the Friedenskreis (Peace Circle) of the Samaritan Community.

The majority of peace, human rights and environmental groups were "mixed-gender", as was the case with the group "Pankower Friedenskreis" (Pankow Peace Circle). An exception was the women's group "Frauen für den Frieden" ("Women for Peace") which was organized in October 1982 as a reaction to the new GDR military service law. The law stipulated that women could be drafted into military service in case of mobilization. The "Frauen für den Frieden" formed a nationwide network and opposed the militarization of society with letters of protest and other actions. The groups were in contact with each other and with women's peace groups in Western Europe. From the mid-1980s onwards, feminist groups and lesbian groups increasingly took part in the networking meetings. This expansion led to conflicts between women from feminist groups and those who saw themselves primarily as "political" groups. For some, women's issues and the criticism of patriarchy were central. For others, criticism of the system was central; they saw themselves first as part of the peace movement and only then as a women's group. The diversity of the women's backgrounds and motives led to conflicts, but also made it possible to establish links with other peace, human rights, environmental, feminist and lesbian groups.

There were also comrades within the SED who, as academics, worked on concepts for the opening and democratization of socialist society, such as the project group "Moderner Sozialismus" ("Modern Socialism") at the Humboldt University of Berlin. However,

there was virtually no contact between these "reform groups" and the peace, human rights and environmental groups, and if so, only on a personal level.

Many actors had learned to debate in the opposition groups. They had learned to defend their political convictions even against resistance. Many were able to overcome the feeling of political and social isolation and became simply "braver". Nevertheless, in 1989, when events came thick and fast, no one was prepared to suddenly step into the spotlight of the public at large and assume political power and responsibility for the future of the GDR.

Groups of actors in 1989 and 1990

In 1989, the political systems in Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and the GDR collapse. In the GDR, the protest against SED policies and the power apparatus spreads from the private sphere and semi-public sphere to the whole of society. New political actors and groups of actors emerge. Representatives of the old bloc parties, such as CDU, LDPD, NDPD, who supported the previous policy, reorient and reposition themselves and enter into new alliances. The party and state leadership are disempowered, and new power structures emerge in favor of the old bloc parties.

The developments are coming in a rapid succession at this state. In what follows, I will outline them in several stages.

A new start between May and August 1989

Local elections are held in the GDR on 7 May. For the first time, an alliance of peace, human rights and environmental groups succeeds in proving the falsification of the election results and making it public. There are growing and continuing protests nationwide. Security forces take massive action against the expanding demonstrations, which provokes further protest. Outrage grows when the SED leadership publicly supports the suppression of the protests on Tiananmen Square in Beijing in June 1989 as an act against counterrevolution. After the opening of the border between Hungary and Austria, from summer onwards many thousands of emigrants and refugees turn their backs on the GDR. This emigration movement can no longer be stopped.

A radical change in the revolutionary phase from September to December 1989

From September to the beginning of December 1989, new political actors come together and new forms of action emerge.

In September, the "Neues Forum" ("New Forum") publishes its founding proclamation. This is followed by the formation of other civic movements, such as "Demokratie Jetzt" (Democracy Now"), "Demokratischer Aufbruch" ("New Democratic Beginning"), "Vereinigte Linke" ("United Left"). The initiators and first signatories come largely from the peace, human rights and environmental groups that emerged in the 1980s. Their common goal is to achieve social dialogue and to persuade the GDR leadership to undertake fundamental social reforms. They want democracy NOW, political pluralism, free elections and thus the end of the SED's sole claim to power and monopoly of power. However, at least in this phase there is **not** (yet) any talk of the "abolition of socialism" and the unification of the two German states.

The "Neues Forum" is particularly popular. Its founding proclamation begins with the sentence "In our country, the communication between state and society is obviously disturbed." The "Neues Forum" aims to be a "political platform" for broad democratic dialogue. It is concerned with building a democratic, ecologically sustainable society that allows for competition but not for unchecked growth, social injustice and exploitation of economically weaker countries. The proclamation touches the nerve of many people. As of the beginning of October, 10,000 people have already signed it. The proportion

of women in "Neues Forum" has been very high from the outset, in contrast to other new civic movements such as "Demokratie Jetzt" and "Demokratischer Aufbruch." Not having been involved with any opposition group before 1989, the physicist Angela Merkel joins "Demokratischer Aufbruch," which merges with the block party CDU in August 1990.

On 4 September, the big Monday demonstrations in Leipzig begin. For the first time, banners are carried with the demand for an "open country with free people", freedom of assembly and association. In other cities of the country, too, thousands take to the streets to demonstrate for democratic reforms and free elections.

On 7 October, the SED celebrates the 40th anniversary of the Republic in Berlin with great pomp. High-ranking guests of state are invited - including Michael Gorbachev. On the fringes of the official celebrations, there are parallel demonstrations with calls such as "We are the people", "No violence", "Gorbi help us", and "Neues Forum". After the departure of the state guests, police and security forces proceed with brutal and random attacks. At the Monday demonstration in Leipzig on 9 October, 70,000 people demonstrate for political reforms, shouting "We are the people". The situation is extremely tense, but the protesters remain peaceful. From that day on, security forces are no longer deployed against the demonstrators, and the events come thick and fast.

For the first time, the Politburo of the SED declares its willingness to engage in dialogue and announces proposals for a broad discussion on "attractive socialism". Erich Honecker resigns, with Egon Krenz becoming his successor as Secretary General of the SED and Chairman of the State Council and announcing the beginning of a "turnaround". The population, however, no longer believes in a "turnaround from above" but has set out to bring about a "turnaround from below" with the motto "We are the people".

On November 4, the largest - approved - mass demonstration in the history of the GDR takes place on Berlin's Alexanderplatz, initiated and organized by theater artists of the Deutsches Theater and members of the "Neues Forum." Hundreds of thousands demand reforms, free elections and freedom of expression.

Even after the resignation of the entire GDR government and the opening of the Wall on 9 November 1989, demonstrations continue throughout the country. Thousands of GDR citizens continue to leave the country. At the end of the month, first in Plauen, then in Leipzig, the call for "Germany United Fatherland" grows louder.

The entire government resigns before the end of November. Hans Modrow is elected as the new Prime Minister and forms a new government, which agrees to convene a round table with the representatives of the opposition, following the Polish model. Representatives of the two Christian churches are to take over the moderation.

On 3 December, the entire Politburo and Central Committee of the SED step down from their functions. The same evening, hundreds of women gather at the Berliner Volksbühne. The national "Unabhängiger Frauenverband" or UFV ("Independent Women's Association") is founded at the initiative of the "Lila Offensive", which was founded in October, among other new women's initiatives. A manifesto has already been prepared with the title: "Without women there can be no state". Behind this slogan is the fear that women's political interests will not be taken into account in the political changes underway. In the calls and programs of the new movements "Neues Forum", "Demokratie Jetzt" und "Demokratischer Aufbruch", as well as in the program of the Social Democratic Party founded on 7 October, women's political interests were not mentioned.

The approach of the UFV is political. Paramount is the creation of a modern socialism in the GDR in a "common European House". This involves the ecological reorganisation of the economy, democracy, an open multicultural society and coexistence in solidarity. In distinction to most other new movements, the majority of the initiators come from the SED or SED-related environment and the "reform wing" within the party. The UFV brings together very different actors from different women's groups. It wants to be a collective movement, platform and action alliance, but at the same time aims at being a direct political AND feminist actor. To combine both in this time of tumultuous events is an enormous strategic challenge that holds a lot of potential for conflict.

In order to be able to participate in the elections to the GDR's People's Chamber, the UFV is officially founded as a political association in February 1990 and enters into an alliance with the Green Party.

Power sharing between government and opposition from December 1989 to March 1990

This phase begins with the convening of the Central Round Table on 7 December 1989, with the "new forces" of the opposition and the civic movements on one side and the "old forces" with the bloc parties represented in the People's Chamber on the other. At its very first meeting, the Round Table mandates a working group to draft a new constitution to be submitted to the People's Chamber after the first free elections for the People's Chamber set for 6 May 1990.

From the beginning of 1990, the governments of the FRG and of the Western Allies increasingly influence the progress and the enormous acceleration of further developments. The United States in particular has a strong interest in accelerating and shortening the path to German unification because of a fear that Gorbachev's domestic power is under threat. In particular, the intention is to move the Soviet leadership to give up its resistance to unified Germany's membership of NATO, the Western military alliance. In July 1990, that time comes. At a meeting with Chancellor Kohl in the Caucasus, Gorbachev gives his consent to unified Germany's independent decision on its alliance membership status. At this meeting, Kohl pledges to the Soviet leadership economic aid and a loan in the double-digit billion range.

At the end of 1989, the economic situation in the GDR becomes extremely difficult. The GDR economy is about to collapse. The migration of 2,000 GDR citizens to the West every day exacerbates the situation from day to day. The calls on the streets for "United Fatherland" and soon also for the D-Mark are getting louder and louder. There are first mass strikes. The tone of the Monday demonstrations that continue to take place changes as the motto "We are the people" gives way to the call for reunification: "We are one people".

In January, the government and the Round Table agree to bring forward the elections to the People's Chamber to 18 March. After the CDU leaves the government, Modrow forms a new government of national responsibility, which includes eight representatives of the opposition groups and new parties.

At the beginning of February, the Modrow government presents a concept entitled "Für Deutschland einig Vaterland" ("For Germany, United Fatherland"), including a step-by-step plan for the road to "German Unity". The plan calls for a contractual community, then a confederation and then the transfer of sovereign rights to the confederation.

Modrow travels to Bonn with a government delegation and asks the Kohl government for an immediate loan. Chancellor Kohl rejects any immediate aid and instead promises economic aid after the People's Chamber elections and the formation of a new GDR government.

At its final meeting on March 12th, the Round Table rejects the achievement of German unity through accession to the jurisdiction of the Constitution ("Grundgesetz") according to Article 23.

The results of the People's Chamber elections on 18 March 1990 are a clear vote for the fast track to German unity intended by Chancellor Kohl and propagated and massively supported in the run-up to the elections. The conservative electoral alliance "Allianz für Deutschland" ("Alliance for Germany"), consisting of the former bloc party CDU, the newly founded DSU and the "Demokratischer Aufbruch" receives just under 41% of the vote, while the newly founded social democratic party receives just under 21%. The alliance of civic opposition movements suffers a bitter defeat with 2.9% of the vote. The electoral alliance of Greens and UFV receives 2%.

At the beginning of April, the new People's Chamber is constituted. CDU chairman De Maizière forms a coalition government of "Allianz für Deutschland", Social Democrats and Liberals. The draft of a new constitution submitted by the representatives of the Round Table is not even discussed by the newly formed People's Chamber; it is off the table. The Ministry for Equality that the UFV requested does not come into existence. Instead, the SPD appoints an equal opportunity commissioner.

The focus in the following months from April to August is exclusively on the negotiations on the unification treaties. It is no longer a matter of creating an independent GDR but only of adapting the GDR constitution and laws to the constitution and legislation of the Federal Republic. The Treaty on Economic, Monetary and Social Union is signed on 18 May. On 17 June the People's Chamber passes the "Treuhandgesetz" (the "Trustee Act"). The Treuhandanstalt (the Trust Agency) has as its task the privatization of GDR companies and collective plants (Kombinate). The diversification into different forms of ownership, which the Round Table and the Modrow government sought, is no longer planned. On 21 June the Bundestag (the FRG parliament) and the People's Chamber pass the state treaty between the two German states. It acknowledges women merely with the sentence "The interests of women and disabled people will be taken into account".

However, fierce controversies arise in the negotiations concerning the future regulation of abortion. In the GDR, the "time-clause solution" ("Fristenlösung") applies. In the FRG, §218 of the Penal Code allows abortion only under specific medical and ethical circumstances. Independent of their party preferences, women in the FRG are committed to the adoption of the time-clause solution in the all-German legislation. In the GDR, tens of thousands of women loudly resist the introduction of §218 with demonstrations and other actions. A compromise and transitional solution is reached. The time-clause solution is to apply in the Eastern German states until 1992.

On 1 July, the monetary union comes into force with the introduction of the D-mark in GDR territory, which signifies, with all its consequences, that the era of all GDR companies is over for good. In August, there is a coalition crisis, as a result of which the SPD ministers leave the coalition. On 22 August, the People's Chamber decides to join the jurisdiction of the Constitution (Grundgesetz) in accordance with Article 23 of the Constitution as of 3 October 1990, followed by the signing of the Unification Treaty, the two-plus-four treaty between government representatives of the four Allies, the FRG and the GDR. At the end of September, the GDR leaves the Warsaw Pact. Two days before the accession of the GDR to the jurisdiction of the Constitution of the FRG on 3 October 1990, CDU East and West are united. On 3 October the GDR disappears from the map. The East German acceding territory now belongs to the Federal Republic of Germany, to the European Union and to the NATO.

Conclusion

Many women entered the political stage during the phase of revolutionary upheaval in autumn 1989 in the GDR. They were founders and co-founders of civic opposition movements and new parties. However, they did not succeed in asserting women- and gender-specific interests in the newly constituted patriarchal-conservative power relations, which were dominated by a majority of men. "No state can be made without women" was the motto of the Independent Women's Association. However, the events of the upheaval of power and of the system in the GDR in 1989/90 (unfortunately) suggest otherwise. It is up to us women to learn from this history for present and future attempts at fundamental social renewal for the wellbeing of present and future generations.