

# **The importance of civil courage as a democratic virtue and value in the context of political change in Germany, 1989-1990.**

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Today is the historic date when ten years ago were two separated nations unified - East and West Germany. I am observing this process from the Institute, which was established to promote civil courage in the society. And I was able to experience in 1990 and in the years before people who fought for their democratic rights showing civil courage. My focus is the process of unification in Germany and mainly the change in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). But it is important, that other societies also were changed in this time and the separation of the world in two interests poles between east and west was changed. In many countries who belonged to the eastern hemisphere societies also were changed in the short amount of time from the bottom up. In mass demonstrations people forced the political leaders to listen and brought them down to their knees. And at the same time similar forces could be observed in western countries fighting for human rights, peace and disarmament. Civil courage is in this processes one of the most important and promising sign for democratic change.

What is significant about civil courage, what values and norms people associate with their protests? The power of a grass root movement in a society can develop is best demonstrated in the process of change in the GDR. 1989 was when democracy occurred in the GDR. In Leipzig on September 4th, 1989 young people who were willing to leave the country left the peace services at the Nicolai Church and proclaimed, " we are the people". With this they clearly demonstrated that it was not the leading government representing the people, but the people in the nation opposing the current state of the nation. These were people that had not been elected by the people of the nation, but with their voice they were able to pull the masses of the nation to their side.

In the recent elections in May of 1989 the government of the GDR had been reelected and confirmed in their position as the leader of the nation. However, the elections had been forged and the homogeneous picture of the GDR which had been built over a period of 40 years was crumbling. Opposing groups had uncovered the forgery and morally forced the leading party SED to collapse. To uncover the forgery of the election, to criticize the one party government,

and to criticize other groups in general was almost impossible in the GDR. However, throughout the history of the divided Germany after the second World War were people who maintained the right and the virtue for critical thinking on human rights and freedom rights. Now, the younger generation wanted to explore if all of the socialistic achievements of their mothers and fathers were carried out in the sense of Socialism or if other reasons such as power issues played a role in maintaining the status quo of the government. To be active in the opposition required in the twenty years before the reunification a considerable amount of civil courage. Opposing work meant betraying the socialistic constitution and resulted in the prosecution through the state security services. Which were the values dominating the opposing activists to criticize the government and risking their jobs, imprisonment, loss of friends and deprivation of citizenship? To deprive them of citizenship was the worst punishment, because that meant that they were never able to get back in touch with their families and friends. Yet, deprivation of citizenship was the only way to get to the western hemisphere, but it also involved disconnecting yourself from your roots and to leave the only place you were familiar with. Consequently the wall appeared to be more frightening from the west than from the east. But the opposing activists were willing to show civil courage for the values of human rights, ecological environment issues, freedom of opinion and free elections. And this meant persecution, constant observation and being spied on. Hence it was easier for the majority of the people to conform with the political, cultural and moral values of the GDR than to risk one's livelihood and emotional well being. The younger generation however started to question the current possibilities. Inspired by television, friends and relatives who were allowed to travel from east to west, the west seemed so close that the first people attempted to leave the GDR in 1989 through countries such as Hungary and Austria. After protesting in Leipzig and in other cities a mass movement started, not towards the wall which separated East- from West-Germany, since this was too dangerous; but more and more people were trying to find their way out of East-Germany through other neighbouring countries showing that nothing in their own country was holding them back.

How did this movement start? Why was the government not able to undermine the protests and opposition of the people? The GDR was set in their ways and their leadership for 40 years, when the younger generation voiced their criticisms of their state and called for more democracy in the pursuit to influence the development of their state. However it was never the intention of the opposing people to disintegrate the GDR, but rather to create change inspired by the Perestroika in the Soviet Union and Gorbatschow.

The 40th anniversary of the GDR was celebrated in 1989 (a short time after the forged elections) and the obvious critics poised against the government were ignored and silenced with the festivities highlighting the achievements of the GDR. Thousands of citizens were forced to attend the festivities against their own free will. Simultaneously the civil movement in the nation was developing quickly after the celebration for the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Illegal Demonstrations started during church services, flyers were given out and through word of mouth, information on the ongoing activities were spread. Everybody had to decide for themselves if they were willing to participate in the protests and to risk being arrested and interrogated by the state security services. To do this meant to show civil courage and it entailed even more civil courage to establish forums where oppositional ideas were discussed and oppositional networks were created, because most of these groups included people that were working for the state security services who spied on activists pursuing democratic values. Even though everybody was afraid of the power the state security services was holding it was also looked at as part of everyday life in the GDR. Nevertheless it was difficult to be disobedient to the common rules and values held in the GDR by the majority of people. The requirements for civil disobedience against the government were given in the Fall of 1989, and in the Winter of 1989-90, the question was if change could be brought about with or without violence. In Germany pictures of the protest in Prague in 1968 are still existent where peaceful protests and popular initiatives were confronted with military tanks. The GDR itself remembered the marching-up of soviet tanks in 1953, but according to Michael Gorbatschow this would be something that would not happen again, which in return encouraged opposition groups in 1989 and 1990 to fight for their beliefs. The pictures of the blood bath in China at the end of the 80th during the crush of the protests on the „Tianamen square“ („Platz des himmlischen Friedens“) in Peking were not only disapproved by the civilians but also by many people in the government, because it violated humanistic ideals from their point of view. In retrospect it is clear that various preliminary symptoms existed calling for civil action, but activists in 1989 and 1990 were not able to see that. Rather than standing up for their belief and show civil courage many civilians chose to leave the country instead.

One important sign of civil courage is that one can never be certain that one's goal will really be achieved. It is a venture to cast-off existing norms and values and hope that democratic values will win and that human rights will prevail. The people who fought with civil courage

for a new democratic GDR did not know if the state security system or other police forces would arrest them and destroy their mission and their unity as a group. The system of opposition was a network of people where every one of them has decided for themselves how much they were willing to risk in the fight for democracy and justice for all. This network did not retrieve its power through a determined and closed membership, but rather drew its strength through sympathy with ideals and norms and the courage with which activists struggled to break old structures of the current government. This strength is typical for civil courage. People with civil courage rely on their own inner strength and don't automatically submit to the majority rule and find ways to resist authoritative tendencies to insist on their right to their own opinion. Therefore civil courage is closely linked to the common and civil society and represents a democratic value. It is the opposite of authoritative forces, submission, and military actions. Civil courage requires the abandonment of military force. Civil courage is not only important in the political arena, but in our day to day interactions with others as well.

Civil courage consists of a number of single actions taken every day by people who fight injustice in our society. The actions taken are motivated by their consciousness. It is not heroism what these people do, even though taking action in difficult situations means also taking risks. The goal in civil courage is determined by what is good for the society itself and not by one's own well being. Many of these elements are visible in the oppositional groups of the GDR.

Which are the groups in the GDR who developed civil courage? Which background had the members of the different groups and is the background important for civil courage?

One group is the Christian church. The SED had long worked against the church to put a stop to the early anti-communist actions of the evangelical church. Even though the church was largely able to maintain its independency, it was left with a small number of church members. However, the remaining eight million members of the church held on strongly to their values and beliefs.

The next important group are people from the generation of 35 to 45 years old civilians, the children generation of the GDR. Meanwhile a generational conflict was developing that the existing block party, the father generation, was not able to handle. Not all but many of the children generation of GDR felt not connected to the system itself anymore, but to the ideals upon which the system was created.

The third group deal with ecological questions. An accident in 1986 in a soviet nuclear power plant showed clearly the dangers of industrial exploitation of nature and it became further known how much industrial plants had already been destroyed in the GDR. Last but not least was women of the GDR that voiced their displeasure of the system and contributed to the fall of the GDR. Even though they were able work in most professions and had more rights than women in West Germany, these equal rights had not carried over into their household work. Not only did most women work outside of their homes, but they were also mainly responsible for all the household work alone.

During the turning point in the years of 1989 and 1990 socialistic ideas still remained a focal point for the oppositional groups. This is very important, because it clearly shows that there was always an interest and enough common ground to communicate with the government. All opposing groups had a chance to find common ground based on the old values and ideals of the old system, because they explicitly cited the approved scholar Rosa Luxemburg who had emphasized in her work the "freedom of people who think differently". This clearly states the interest in the nation and their values and it strikes back the fear that the wish for freedom of speech did not mean to overthrow the government and certain ideas and values as it was put by the current government. This had an enormous impact on all people who were able to see and hear what was going on. In the period of change in 1989-1990 however it became visible that various sources are accountable for the democratic outset and mobilization of the masses. The first one hundred people who wanted to realize other forms of living were members of a youth subculture. The next one thousand people who wanted change were intellectuals asking for human rights. Following them were the next ten thousand people who were factory workers and other trained workers demanding the freedom for consumption and more consumer goods. Finally it was the last 100.000 people pushing for change. These were the average people who were usually apolitical, but wanted to take the chance for change in their society. Since almost every 5th person in the former GDR was also a member of the state party and had a task within the party it also happened that these people started participating in the ongoing demonstrations even though they had a very different job that they needed to do. On one hand they were spies sent out to get information about the plans of the opposing groups and at the same time they got so caught up in the process and were infected by the enthusiasm and argumentation of the opposing groups that they started following them instead of the state party. The government itself attempted to calm the situation later on by signalling

an interest to talk about the current situation, but this turned into a hotbed to show more civil courage for the people. The protests become publicly known when the state television stations started to follow the opposing groups and began to broadcast the current events on television. Another catalyst was that the former GDR did not have a conflict culture. It was a very new experience for most people to go out into the streets and feel spontaneously united with foreign people. To uphold the so-called "Monday-Demonstration" was significant to encourage them to stand on the streets and ask for their rights. To show civil courage is a process where people have to forgo their own fears, show courage and stand up to their own norms and values that may not always be compatible with the overall norms and values of the society. "We are the people" is a sentence from the streets of the demonstrations showing the view of the people in regard to the current situation. The demonstrations themselves turned into a lesson in democracy following the slogan, "the way we are demonstrating today is the way we will be living tomorrow". The way to reach their goals was also an orientation on their goals at that time. The way and the goal corresponding. And it was possible that leaders of the opposing groups were able to communicate with officials of the state party and the police force and gain their understanding for the situation, so that no force was automatically used to end the demonstrations. For the state party the people demonstrating had a face and were not foreigners from other nations aiming to destroy their nation. The critics voiced against the current system were based on human needs, therefore it was easy for a lot of people, including people in state positions to understand where the opposing groups were coming from and to support them. Civil courage can be summarized as a courageous and attentive behaviour in public and private spheres. Civil courage is as Eli Wiesel said, "a flash of clarity and realization turns immediately into action" and it is successful, because it overcomes opposition and connects behind this opposition. The legitimacy of civil courage to call in universal norms and values opens many possibilities to bring change in oppression. Using Theodor W. Adorno's words, "not even the dictator who can decide over life and death in his political decisions is constrained by the chances and alternatives which he is confronted with, psychological surveillance assumes that his instincts and impulses are rather under the power of political goals than dependent on them". It means that we always discuss about oppression but not so often about the internalized oppression. So the interesting question is how strongly dominated people identify themselves with the domineering people and how much their humiliation is part of their fear. Here is a key for the possibilities of civil courage. Only for the possibilities. As the oppressed civil courage can uphold my own identity and my dignity,

and depending on the state of the civil society civil courage can be an instrument in the fight for human rights, equal distribution of goods and maintaining the freedom of humans.

Thank you very much for the opportunity you have given me today to speak on civil courage at an important date as today. I hope I was able to set the tone for the future to promote values and competencies in the sense of a more democratic and righteous world for all humans.

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