

How it went down

The little accident that toppled history

By Mary Elise Sarotte

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BERLIN -- Once events make their passage from news of the day into history books, it is hard to imagine that they could have happened any other way. They're history, after all. And 20 years later, the fall of the Berlin Wall seems like that kind of history -- a world-changing event that we commemorate and celebrate, its heroes and villains well established, its images and significance clearly comprehended.

But the real story of the wall coming down is a lot less tidy than it may appear in the rear-view mirror. The "decision" to open the border was not a conscious choice at all. Instead of a reassuring victory for the forces of freedom, it was a chaotic and potentially violent mess. One of the most momentous events of the past century was, in fact, an accident, a semicomical and bureaucratic mistake that owes as much to the Western media as to the tides of history.

So what really happened?

In the early days of November 1989, East Germans turned out in massive street protests to demand Gorbachev-style reforms. Their dictatorial rulers tried to appease them by issuing "new" travel regulations. Though the rules suggested that there would be freedom, the fine print still included the national security exemptions that had always prevented East Germans from leaving. None of the people writing these new regulations took the obvious steps that would have been needed to open the border, such as consulting the Soviets or informing the border guards that such a move was coming. In short, there were no signs that authorities intended to open the wall on Nov. 9.

That night at 6, Guenter Schabowski, a member of the East German Politburo who served as its spokesman, was scheduled to hold a news conference. Shortly before it began, he received a piece of paper with an update on the regulations and a suggestion that he mention them publicly. He had not been involved in discussions about the rules and did not have time to read the document carefully before starting.

His hour-long news conference was so tedious that Tom Brokaw, who was there, remembered being "bored." But in the final minutes, an Italian journalist's question about travel spurred Schabowski's memory. He tried to summarize the new regulations but became confused, and his sentences trailed off. "Anyway, today, as far as I know, a decision has been made," he said. "It is a recommendation of the Politburo that has been taken up, that one should from the draft of a travel law, take out a passage. . ."

Among the long-winded clauses, some snippets leapt out: "exit via border crossings" and "possible for every citizen."

Suddenly, every journalist in the room had questions. "When does that go into force?" shouted one. "Immediately?" shouted another. Rattled and mumbling to himself, Schabowski flipped through his papers until he uttered the phrase: "Immediately, right away."

It felt as if "a signal had come from outer space and electrified the room," Brokaw recalled. Some wire journalists rushed out to file reports, but the questions kept coming, among them: "What will happen to the Berlin Wall now?"

Alarmed about what was unfolding, Schabowski concluded with more muddled responses: "The question of travel, of the permeability therefore of the wall from our side, does not yet answer, exclusively, the question of the meaning, of this, let me say it this way, fortified border." Furthermore, "the debate over these questions could be positively influenced if the Federal Republic [of West Germany] and if NATO would commit themselves to and carry out disarmament."

As NATO was unlikely to disarm itself by breakfast, Schabowski clearly did not expect much to happen that night. But it was too late -- by 7:03 p.m., the wires were reporting that the Berlin Wall was open.

Across the border, a West German television channel, ARD, reported the news cautiously in its 8 p.m. broadcast, first asserting only that the wall probably would become "permeable" soon. But for its next news program at 10:30 p.m. -- delayed to 10:42 by a soccer match -- the staff went big. Hanns Friedrichs, the moderator who enjoyed a Cronkite-like status in the country, proclaimed, "This ninth of November is a historic day." East Germany "has announced that, starting immediately, its borders are open to everyone."

The show cut live to Berlin, where its lonely correspondent failed to find drama or crowds at either the Brandenburg Gate or the Invaliden Street border-crossing point. It had been nearly four hours since the end of Schabowski's news conference, but no one was crossing or celebrating. The journalists had gotten ahead of reality -- though reality was about to catch up. East Germans, who could watch such western broadcasts illicitly, believed the news and began to gather on their side of the wall.

At the Bornholmer Street border-crossing station in East Berlin, guard Harald Jäger, on the job since 1964, had watched Schabowski on television. Dumbfounded by the remarks, he told his fellow guards that the official's words were "deranged," and he started calling around. His superiors assured him that travel remained blocked, and he and his colleagues were armed as always.

But soon Jäger and his team were busy waving back some would-be crossers who had heard the western reports. A police car arrived and an officer announced over a loudspeaker that it was not possible simply to exit, but the crowd kept swelling.

Before long, the guards at Bornholmer Street were outnumbered by thousands of people; the same thing was happening at several other checkpoints. Overwhelmed and worried for their own safety, Jäger and his fellow guards reasoned that the use of violence might quickly escalate and become uncontrollable. They decided instead at around 9 p.m. to let a trickle of people cross the border, hoping to ease the pressure and calm the crowd. The guards would check each person individually, take notes and penalize the rowdiest by refusing them reentry. They managed to do this for a while, but after a couple of hours the enormous crowd was chanting, "Open the gate, open the gate!"

After more debate, Jäger decided that raising the traffic barriers was the only solution. Around 11:30 p.m., the decades-long Cold War division of Germany ended.

Throughout the night, other crossings opened in much the same way. Every opening meant more people flooding into the west and more images beaming back east, in turn sending more easterners onto the streets. Because of the ongoing top-level crisis meetings, those who might have ordered bloody reprisals were largely uninformed, and unaware that the known parameters of their political lives had suddenly disappeared.

Of course, the wall would have come down eventually, but not necessarily in the same way. An opening on a later date could have posed far more dangers. Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev had made clear that he would not use violence as political change began sweeping Eastern Europe, but what if he had already moved farther down his arc toward losing all power? What might another Soviet leader have done?

Even the exact hour mattered: The wall opened when many East German political and military leaders were sequestered in meetings, and many significant Soviet leaders -- because of the time difference -- were already asleep. What if they'd had time to fortify the borders before the flood of people arrived? As it was, none of them could mount an immediate response, and soon it was too late to undo the events of the evening.

We like to think that all great events have great causes, and obviously long-term political, economic and military forces shaped the Cold War -- and how it ended. But momentous events are also a sort of ambush of history, when all those long-term pressures come together in an unexpected way. The opening of the Berlin Wall, largely unintentional, was such an event, an unsettling thought for those who see history as the result of strategy and planning by pivotal leaders.

If only a few things had been different, we might not have such happy memories to celebrate next week. But thanks to the mumbling of a sleep-deprived East German official, some overzealous Western reporting and the willingness of East Germans to risk a trip to the wall, the Cold War reached a swift and peaceful conclusion.

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