



**Mary Elise Sarotte.** *The Collapse: The Accidental Opening of the Berlin Wall.* New York: Basic Books, 2014. 320 pp. \$27.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-465-06494-6.

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The fall of the Berlin Wall on the night of November 9, 1989, was one of the most significant events of the twentieth century. It attracted global media attention then and even now remains a source of inspiration for people around the world. Germans themselves, not accustomed to having something in their history to celebrate, have relatively recently taken to expressing pride about this happy moment in German history.[1] Yet few people outside of Germany really understand what happened that night in Berlin and in the weeks and months leading up to it.

Perfectly timed to be published on the eve of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the fall of the Wall in 2014, Mary Elise Sarotte's vividly written new book, *The Collapse: The Accidental Opening of the Berlin Wall*, provides the answers. The subtitle immediately captures the reader's attention by making clear that one of the most iconic moments in recent history was in fact an accident. Sarotte's last book, *1989: The Struggle to Create Post-Cold War Europe*, which examined the 1989-90 process of the collapse of East Germany and the unification of Germany on West German terms (also well timed to be published for the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Wall in 2009) won multiple awards. Her latest work may well follow suit.

Sarotte's aim, in part, in *The Collapse* is to demonstrate the erroneous thinking of American triumphalists, including policymakers in the George W. Bush administration, who believe the United States played a key role in the fall of the Berlin Wall. An overemphasis on US influence on the fall of the Wall led in Sarotte's view to a "from Berlin to Baghdad" mentality with the invasion of Iraq in 2003 (p. xxv). Her book demonstrates clearly that East German local actors were the agents of change, the catalysts in bringing down the Berlin Wall, not US policymakers.

She highlights the stories of roughly a dozen key individuals in East Germany, people who were not top leaders, but also were not nobodies, to write what she calls, borrowed from historian Paul Kennedy, "history from the middle" (pp. xxiv, 202n25). Sarotte's central figures come primarily from the East German civil rights movement and the middle level of the East German regime in Berlin and Leipzig. With a knack for good storytelling, Sarotte combines her interviews with some of these people and with many others; published interviews by others; archival sources from the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia, Germany, and Poland; published document collections; memoirs; secondary sources; and contemporaneous television coverage to weave together a

narrative that makes readers feel like they are living through the dramatic events of the fall of 1989.

Sarotte opens and closes her book citing Alexis de Tocqueville on how change comes not when people think it is hopeless but when they think it is possible. She writes about the inspiring role of Mikhail Gorbachev, Solidarity in Poland, and the Hungarians opening their border with Austria, making many East German citizens believe that change was possible. The focus of her book, however, is on the actions of East Germans on the streets and in the leadership hierarchy in October and November 1989.

*The Collapse* not only provides an intense examination of the days and hours that led up to the first opening of the Wall late in the night on November 9, but also describes in depth the other ninth: October 9 in Leipzig. On that date, more than seventy thousand East Germans marched in protest carrying candles and banners that read "no violence" (*keine Gewalt*) and "we are the people!" (*Wir sind das Volk!*). Instead of the brutal crackdown that had been expected, the peaceful East German citizens, in the largest demonstration yet in 1989, were allowed to process en masse around the ring road in the center of Leipzig. Sarotte emphasizes how important it was that the protestors remained peaceful, making it much harder for the security forces to respond with brute force.

Most former activists from East Germany feel that October 9 was even more important than November 9, since this was the day they lost their fear of standing up to the Communist regime and demanding change. As several speakers, including German President Joachim Gauck, asserted in Leipzig on the twenty-fifth anniversary of this demonstration in 2014: "There would have been no 9 November without 9 October. Freedom came before unity." [2] The East Germans first needed to feel the freedom to express themselves (*Wir sind das Volk!*); later they would give their support to unification (*Wir sind ein Volk!*) (We are one people).

Sarotte's description of how things came together on October 9 in Leipzig is both gripping and moving (chapter 3). She alternates between the people gathering in churches for the Monday night peace prayers and demonstrations; the party and Stasi officials in Leipzig scrambling to decide how to respond to the far larger than expected mass of more than seventy thousand peaceful protestors; and the clandestine filming of the demonstration from the roof of a church by two dissidents (Aram Radomski and Siggi Schefke), who then

passed on the video to a West German journalist (Ulrich Schwarz) to get it to the West. Due to new Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) guidelines, which had been strongly supported by US Secretary of State George Schulz and were agreed upon in Vienna in early 1989, Western journalists could travel back and forth across the Iron Curtain without being searched. Still, as Schwarz told Sarotte, to be extra sure, he carried the video cassette across the border into West Berlin in his underwear and turned it over to Roland Jahn, an East German who had been expelled by the government and was working as a journalist in West Berlin. Jahn aired the tape on television on October 10, and millions of East Germans saw the footage of the peaceful march of demonstrators in Leipzig. This showed them they were not alone in wanting change and gave them added courage to maintain or increase the pressure on the regime for change. As Sarotte explains, the importance of television would be repeated on November 9 in Berlin.

One of Sarotte's key conclusions is that at several key points in Leipzig and then in Berlin, there was more trust among regular citizens demonstrating against the regime, even when they did not personally know each other (such as the minister of Leipzig's Reformed Church, Hans-Jürgen Sievers, and Radomski and Schefke, who filmed from the roof of his church), than there was among party and police officials who had often known each other for years. Communication was also better among citizens in the opposition than within the regime.

Whether by virtue of living through November 9, 1989, or being acquainted with the works of the German historian Hans-Hermann Hertle on the fall of the Wall, most Germans are familiar with the basic story Sarotte tells about the opening of the Berlin Wall, as they are with the events in Leipzig on October 9. Hertle is well known in Germany, particularly in the media, as the go-to person on the fall of the Wall, and he is a long-time friend of Sarotte's. She draws deeply on Hertle's works and on his contacts to important figures connected with the fall of the Wall and recognizes this in her acknowledgments. [3] She augments this with more interviews, archival research, and her engaging prose.

Sarotte describes the multiple sources of pressure on the East German regime to make reforms, including in loosening its restrictions on allowing its citizens to travel to West Germany and West Berlin. This pressure came from the increasing numbers of East Germans fleeing

the country (many of whom fled to Czechoslovakia leading the Czechoslovak and West German governments to push the East German regime to relax its travel regulations); and the growing numbers of East Germans taking to the streets at home, climaxing in a demonstration in East Berlin with five hundred thousand people on November 4. Within the leadership, the long-time ruler Erich Honecker had been ousted in mid-October and replaced by Egon Krenz. In early November, mid-level officials in the interior ministry were tasked with formulating a new travel law. These officials exceeded their directives in multiple ways, but none of the higher ups really noticed, as Sarotte recounts. There was poor or no communication at key moments between mid-level and senior-level East German officials, among the East German leaders, and between the East German and Soviet regimes. By the evening of November 9, Krenz and his colleagues thought they all knew what they had agreed to regarding a new travel law and that they had Soviet support. They sent Politburo member and spokesman Günter Schabowski to address a press conference early that evening, but he had missed much of the leadership's afternoon meeting and had not looked closely at the new travel law.

Schabowski's erroneous announcement around 7:00 p.m. that the borders to West Germany and West Berlin were open "right away" was then featured in television broadcasts on both sides of the Berlin Wall (p. 118). Over the next several hours, tens, then hundreds and thousands of East Germans gathered at the official checkpoints along the Wall expecting to be let through. Sarotte does a fantastic job of describing what happened at Bornholmer Strasse, the first checkpoint to open (chapter 6). Harald Jäger, the Stasi officer who happened to be in charge of the checkpoint that night, since the regular chief official was at a meeting, kept trying to reach his bosses on the phone to ask what to do about the thousands of citizens, including some very angry ones, demanding that Jäger follow through on what Schabowski had (erroneously) announced. His superiors did not really believe him about how many people were there and thought perhaps he was just a coward. After serving at that crossing point for twenty-five years, Jäger was insulted and angry that his bosses lacked confidence in his judgment of the situation—another key example of Sarotte's point that the people in power did not have great trust in each other.

With the number of citizens, including several of those Sarotte has profiled in the book, demanding to be let through into West Berlin vastly outnumbering the

staff on duty, Jäger opened the border. A West German television crew from Spiegel TV happened to be there and captured it all on film to be shown on television, which in turn would spur on more people to gather at the checkpoints. Meanwhile, the Soviet deputy ambassador in Berlin, Igor Maximychev, decided there was really nothing to do to stop all this without causing massive bloodshed and thus did not wake up the ambassador or call Moscow that night. By the next day, after a night of people dancing on top of the Wall (shown live to viewers in the United States by Tom Brokaw and his staff, also interviewed by Sarotte), it was too late to turn it all back.

As Sarotte tells the dramatic story, after forty years in power and twenty-eight years with the Berlin Wall, a series of accidents, mistakes, and coincidences, combined with lack of trust among the leaders and more trust among the opposition, led to the unexpected opening of the Wall. Sarotte's wonderfully written book backed up with reams of research and interviews explains the factors that led to one of the most important moments in the twentieth century. Particularly for students and scholars who do not read German, this book is essential reading to understand the fall of the Berlin Wall.

#### Notes

[1]. The evolving German historical memory of the Berlin Wall is the subject of my forthcoming book, *After the Berlin Wall: Memory and the Making of the New Germany, 1989 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming 2016).

[2]. Joachim Gauck, speech in Leipzig, "The 25th Anniversary of the Peaceful Revolution," *Der Bundespräsident*, October 9, 2014, <http://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/EN/JoachimGauck/Reden/2014/141009-Rede-zur-Demokratie.html>. For more on the twenty-fifth anniversary celebrations in Leipzig, see <http://www.lichtfest.leipziger-freiheit.de/>. A detailed account of the revolution in Leipzig and beyond can be found in Michael Richter, *Die Friedliche Revolution: Aufbruch zur Demokratie in Sachsen 1989/90* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht GmbH & Co., 2010). There is even a graphic novel about the peaceful revolution in Leipzig, PM Hoffmann and Bernd Lindner, *Herbst der Entscheidung: Eine Geschichte aus der Friedlichen Revolution* (Berlin: Christoph Links Verlag, 2014).

[3]. Hertle's books on the fall of the Wall include *Der Fall der Mauer: Die unbeabsichtigte Selbstauflösung*

*der SED-Staates* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 1996); *Chronik des Mauerfalls: Die dramatische Ereignisse um den 9. November 1989* (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 1996); his volume of transcripts of the final Central Committee meetings of the ruling East German Socialist Unity Party (the SED) in October-December 1989 coedited with Gerd-Rüdiger Stephan, *Das Ende der SED: Die letzten Tages des Zentralkomitees* (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 1997); and his coauthored book with Kathrin Elsner, *Mein 9. November: Der Tag, an dem die Mauer fiel* (Berlin: Nicolai Verlag, 1999). Many of these have been published in multiple editions. Hertle's *Chronik des Mauerfalls* (Chronicle of the fall of the Wall) in fact has been published in twelve editions since 1996. His edited transcripts of the SED Central Committee meetings in the fall of 1989 have been released in Germany on CD and DVD and formed the basis of Hertle's inspiration for a play premiered by theater 89 in 2012 and performed numerous times since, *Das Ende der SED: Die letzten Tages des Zentralkomitees*. Hertle was the historical consultant for the play and worked with the ac-

tors to bring to life the chaotic final months of Communist power in East Germany, both before and after the fall of the Wall. If Germans have not read his books or seen the play, they may have seen one of Hertle's documentary films, in particular the moving and surprisingly funny documentary he codirected with Gunther Scholz in 1999, *Als die Mauer Fiel: 50 Stunden, die die Welt veränderten* (also available with English subtitles as *When the Wall Came Tumbling Down: 50 Hours That Changed the World*), which makes clear both the lack of communication among the East German leaders up and down the hierarchy and the ad hoc nature of the opening of the Berlin Wall. For this film, Hertle interviewed key German and international figures involved in one way or another with the fall of the Wall, including Harald Jäger, the official in charge of the border crossing at Bornholmer Strasse in Berlin, who would be the first to allow East Germans unfettered access to West Berlin on the night of November 9. As Sarotte notes, Hertle joined her for her first interview with Jäger.

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