



THE LONG ROAD TO FREEDOM









Thousands of visitors commemorate the events of autumn 1989 at Leipzig Festival of Lights.

The Zeitgeschichtliches Forum is a source of inspiration for recollections and discussions.

On 9 November 2019, Germany commemorates the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Events started to unfold the evening before, as people danced and sang on top of the wall in front of Brandenburg Gate. The pictures were seen around the globe. It was a turning point in world history. However, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the East German regime were only the final act in a long struggle for freedom by the people of East Germany and Eastern Europe. No one at the time would have guessed that within just a few weeks, the East German dictatorship, with its well-equipped police force, army and secret service, would implode, despite the presence of occupying Soviet forces.

Those four weeks in autumn 1989 are now known as the Peaceful Revolution in Germany. It all began in Leipzig, where the whole world came together twice a year for the Leipzig Trade Fair. Every six months, the people of Leipzig had a chance to get a glimpse beyond the wall, and to see how the other half of Germany lived. Eventually they were no longer willing to accept such inequality. On the evening of 9 October, over 70,000 people congregated in the city centre to join in the protests, shouting "We are the people!" The government was powerless in the face of so many determined, peaceful demonstrators. This major protest march in Leipzig was the cue for people all over the country to stand up and be heard. Throughout East Germany, the crowds at the Monday Demonstrations swelled, and attendance at the prayers for peace in the churches steadily increased. East Germans took their freedom into their own hands and refused to give it back. These events are commemorated every year at the Leipzig Festival of Lights in the original locations.



A NEW EXHIBITION IN LEIPZIG

In retrospect, the events that brought about the fall of the wall may seem like a simple success story with a happy ending, but for the people who experienced them, it was a long and painful road. A new permanent exhibition at the Zeitgeschichtliches Forum in Leipzig highlights the revolutionary changes that took place in Eastern Europe and the German Democratic Republic during this period, as well as the German reunification process. “Our History. Dictatorship and Democracy after 1945”, which opened in November 2018, is a modernised version of the previous exhibition from 1999 and is now even more up-to-date, international and emotional. Featuring some 2,000 objects, documents, photos and films, it illustrates the significance of political decisions and historic turning points in Germany’s political systems after 1945. The exhibition also appeals to international visitors as it portrays events using state-of-the-art media, presents all informational text bilingually in German and English, and puts the entire subject in a global context.

A LAND OF CONTRADICTIONS

The exhibition not only chronicles political developments, it particularly highlights the fine balance between ideology, violence and everyday life. Many of the exhibits, documents and reconstructed scenes convey an impression of how people lived in former East



Germany. Propaganda and surveillance infiltrated all aspects of life – at school and work, in the home and during leisure time. But the exhibition also shows the other side of the coin, underlining the tremendous tension caused by the opposing forces of suppression and rebellion, conformity and escape.

The exhibition takes a look back at 40 years of socialism in East Germany.

CONTEMPORARY VOICES

The story of the oppositional movement is also told very poignantly. Poets and songwriters, churchgoers, environmental activists and free thinkers – they all had their idea of a better form of socialism, a better life, with greater freedom. The more East Germans inwardly rejected the powers that be, the more they resisted and contradicted, the more of them tried to leave the country, the more the regime responded with repression. Here, again, the exhibition contrasts the testimony of the opposition, such as books, songs and documents, with the relics of repression, such as the technical surveillance and wiretapping devices used by the police and intelligence services.

One exhibit is a prisoner transport vehicle belonging to the Ministry for State Security, the East German regime's infamous secret service. From the outside, it looks like a harmless van, but inside it is fitted out with dark, narrow cells. In one of these cells hangs a



Exhibits show excerpts from industry, production and people's experiences at the time.

monitor, on which former political prisoners describe their experiences. These, as well as all other eyewitness accounts that can be seen and heard throughout the exhibition, are presented in their original versions with English subtitles. It is these contemporary voices that make a visit to the exhibition a particularly emotional experience.

DAWN OF FREEDOM

Surveillance, intimidation and the threat of imprisonment were no longer enough to curb the desire for freedom. No one could have foreseen that the occupying Soviet forces, which had once propelled the East German regime to power both militarily and politically, would now deny it support in its attempt to forcibly control the opposition. Mikhail Gorbachev, head of state in Moscow since 1985, gave the people of East Germany hope with his policies of "glasnost" (openness) and "perestroika" (reconstruction). At the demonstrations that autumn, people not only held up banners stating their demands for freedom, but also pictures of the Soviet reformer, chanting "Gorbi, Gorbi, Gorbi!"

Sound recordings from the meetings in Leipzig's St. Nicholas Church and film excerpts of the people's protests, animations of a map showing how quickly the peaceful revolution spread across East German cities in just a few weeks, and finally a Trabant breaking through original parts of the Berlin Wall, all give visitors an idea of the prevailing mood, feelings and hopes. The new exhibition no longer ends with the fall of the Berlin Wall, but continues beyond it to show the difficult path to democracy and economic changes in East Germany, the international process of German Reunification, and the coming together of all Germans in a free Europe.

TRAVELINFO

Zeitgeschichtliches Forum Leipzig

The Zeitgeschichtliches Forum Leipzig is part of the Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland Foundation based in Bonn and Berlin. It opened on 9 October 1999 by then-chancellor Gerhard Schröder to mark the tenth anniversary of the protest marches in Leipzig. Since that time, over 3.7 million guests have visited the museum. Entrance is free.
www.hdg.de

Leipzig Festival of Lights

The people of Leipzig and visitors to the city remember the historic events every year on 9 October. Thousands of visitors of all generations come to see exhibitions, panel discussions, film shows, readings and much more.
www.lichtfest.leipziger-freiheit.de

