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Non-Violent Political Protest in East Germany in the 1980s: Protestant Church, Opposition Groups and the People

ANDREAS HADJAR

The main aim of this article is to explore why the activists of the 'peaceful revolution' in East Germany (GDR) employed non-violent means of protest (e.g., peace prayers, human chains, appeals). The link between Lutheran Church and opposition groups is also covered. To deal with these questions, a qualitative methodological perspective is applied. Members of East German civil rights groups, participants in Leipzig demonstrations in 1989 and experts were interviewed; pamphlets, manifestos from and about action groups and social science studies were analysed. Results show that there are moral and religious as well as tactical and rational reasons to act in a non-violent way.

Some 14 years after the *Wende* in East Germany, this article will reconsider the events in 1989 with regard to the non-violent protest behaviour of the opposition movement. East German civil rights groups played an important part in initiating the mass protest that eventually led to the changes in East Germany. Unlike events in China or Romania, the political upheaval in East Germany took a peaceful course. This article will raise several questions from a particular perspective. Why did the opposition movement of autumn 1989 remain peaceful? What motivated members of opposition groups to act non-violently? Did the police and the Stasi (State Security Service) commit acts of violence, and how did the civil rights activists respond? Did opposition groups substantially influence the *Wende* in 1989? The crucial point is whether the non-violent behaviour is a result of a specific value system or rather a rational response to the conditions of the situation. These two notions are similar to the division between the socialisation and rational perspectives in contemporary sociology. Whereas some explanations and common sense views place the non-violent forms of protest in the realm of morality and altruism, this article will also focus on rational motives of non-violence. The main thesis is that peacefulness can be supported by values, but can also be linked to rational motives. These motives are influenced by the characteristics of actors and of the particular context.

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To explore these questions, members of East German civil rights groups and participants in the Leipzig demonstrations in 1989 were interviewed as well as experts who observed the birth and development of East German opposition groups. Instead of focusing on the main protagonists of the *Wende*, the starting point of this article is taken from interviews with non-prominent members of opposition groups and people who did not engage in such groups. This case study design is similar to the ‘bottom-up’ approach of Grix,¹ who focused on the actions of ordinary people during the *Wende*. Pamphlets, manifestos and articles from and about action groups and new movements in the late 1980s were also used. This research is then placed in the context of other results of social science studies about the change process.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The Roots of the GDR Opposition Movement

Looking at the roots of the opposition groups, the notion of peacefulness as a result of the internalisation of particular religious and pacifist values seems to be supported.

According to a research group around Pollack,² three main roots of the civil rights movement in the GDR can be identified. First, there were peace groups. In 1962, universal compulsory military service was introduced in the GDR. There were no exceptions for pacifists until the introduction of an unarmed alternative military service in 1964, still under the auspices of the army. Conscientious objectors doing this alternative service (*Bausoldaten*) had to suffer considerable social disadvantages, such as being excluded from university and being conscripted at an older age, thereby risking being torn away from their young families. Conscientious objectors and others in need of advice gathered around the Lutheran Church. Peace groups demanding a real alternative service outside the army emerged. A sculpture by a Soviet artist that stands in front of the UN building in New York City and the verse from the Bible *Schwerter zu Pflugscharen* (Swords into Ploughshares) became symbols of this movement.

Second, many left-wing intellectuals were impressed by the democratic changes happening in Czechoslovakia during the Prague Spring of 1968. After democratisation was violently suppressed by the armies of other socialist countries, the notion of freedom and democracy remained in the minds of many people. The end of the Ulbricht era and the takeover by Erich Honecker as the new head of state in 1971 and the signing of the CSCE (Conference of Security and Co-operation in Europe) contract in Helsinki in 1975 brought a slight liberation. Clubs for young people, as well as student and workers’ groups, developed. But events, bands and songs dealing critically with East

German everyday life soon reached the edge of what could be tolerated by GDR state officials and were banned. The bans culminated in the expulsion of the popular singer-songwriter Wolf Biermann from the GDR in 1976. In response to that act several left-wing intellectuals and artists became involved in church groups or left the GDR.

A third root can be found in the social work of the Protestant churches. From the end of the 1960s, young people, alcoholics, former prisoners and others found their way to open meetings in churches. Later, peace groups, environmental groups, self-help groups and flat-sharing communities developed out of such meetings. The concerns of these groups ranged from environmental problems, the rising dissatisfaction with the dogmatic policies of the SED regime and the wish for democracy, free speech and liberation.

It can be concluded that the GDR opposition movement is based on a pacifist peace movement and on other roots that are closely connected to the church so that a high level of religious and humanist values of peacefulness within opposition groups appears to be plausible.

Developments Before 1989

A more detailed look at particular occasions and situations tells much about possible rational motives of non-violent protest actions, but also highlights the value base of human behaviour.

By the mid-1980s, a number of groups, structured according to the principles of grassroots democracy, existed under the roof of the Protestant church. A first step to build up a broader movement was the foundation of the Initiative für Frieden und Menschenrechte (Action Group for Peace and Civil Rights) in 1986. Due to developments in Poland, where the oppositional *Solidarnosc* movement had forced the government to an official registration, the SED were fearful of similar developments happening in the GDR. Consequently the government intensified actions against opposition groups, deploying police and the Stasi (State Security Service). Many people were arrested. Some of them had to leave the country, others spent years in prison. The church intervened on behalf of those arrested. This intervention was then aided by the West German news media and the West German peace movement.

The reforms of Soviet President Gorbachev in the mid-1980s raised hopes in many East German people. However, the GDR ruling elite continued a wait-and-see policy. However, the GDR niche society – where free discussion was only a matter of the hidden private sphere – changed; a replacement public sphere developed leading to more critical discussion at the workplace.³ Hopes for liberation were soon destroyed, as the Stasi took action against the Berlin Environmental Library in November 1987 and more than 100 people were arrested during and after the annual memorial demonstration for Rosa

Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht in January 1988. Meanwhile, the group of those who had applied officially to leave the GDR ('exit people') became increasingly important in the movement. They were welcomed by some opposition groups, but were also seen as destructive and dangerous for the aims of the movement by other groups and church officials. However, the exit people were able to activate others to join the movement. The ban on the Soviet news digest '*Sputnik*' and some Soviet films in November of 1988 caused more protest. In May 1989, local elections were held all over the GDR. Some people followed a boycott instigated by opposition groups and even some church parishes. Despite these oppositional measures, a faked result of 98.95 per cent yes votes was published by government officials. Whereas in Poland and Hungary new policies were introduced, the GDR government held onto conservative Stalinist notions. These facts and the opening of the border between Hungary and Austria in May led to a rise of people who left the GDR. The situation inside the GDR and the opposition groups could no longer be neglected, as the West German media reported on all these issues very frequently.

The Chronology of the Wende in 1989

Reconsidering the course⁴ of the events in autumn 1989 gives a glimpse of the complexity of the processes the protesters had to go through to make decisions on their behaviour while restricted by state responses and yet expecting a breakthrough.

The starting point of the events in the autumn of 1989 was the foundation of the opposition group Neues Forum (New Forum) on 9 September. The function of this platform was to bring people of all professions, lifestyles, parties and groups together to discuss and attempt to solve vital social problems in GDR society. On 11 September, the foundation appeal of Neues Forum was illegally published and distributed. Some days later, the group applied to GDR district governments for registration and was rejected by the Ministry of the Interior. Following Monday prayers on 2 October at the Leipzig Nikolai Church, 10,000 people joined a demonstration for democratic reforms and the registration of Neues Forum. Some protesters were injured and arrested by the police and the Stasi. Over the next few days thousands of people gathered at Dresden central station, following the closure of the border to Czechoslovakia by the GDR government, to protest and to demand permission to leave the country. The Stasi and police used water cannons and truncheons against the protesters. On 6 October, the day before the celebration of the 40th anniversary of the GDR, Neues Forum addressed an appeal to the GDR government, protesting against the unwillingness of the government to allow reform. Neues Forum demanded responsible behaviour from all citizens, as the initiators feared violent confrontations

between the GDR state and the people. The Leipzig Monday demonstration on 9 October was close to becoming disastrous. The police, the Stasi and the army stood by to stop the demonstration. It was only because the security men did not receive a combat order and the demonstrators were supported by some local SED leaders that the demonstration of 100,000 people took a peaceful course. The head of state Erich Honecker, and other ruling politicians, resigned on 18 October. On the same day, a panel discussion took place in Berlin and was broadcast on GDR television. SED officials, the writer Stefan Heym and the Neues Forum initiator Bärbel Bohley, among others, took part in the discussion. On 30 October, 200,000 demonstrators attended the Leipzig Monday demonstration. However, the largest non-state demonstration took place on 4 November. Approximately one million people followed the call of opposition groups, cultural organisations and artists. On 6 November, demonstration stewards of Neues Forum kept the peace at the Leipzig Monday demonstration (500,000 participants) and saved the Stasi building against possible attack. One day later, the entire GDR government resigned. On 8 November, Neues Forum received confirmation of registration. As utterly confused SED official Guenther Schabowski informed the media on the evening of 9 November about the introduction of a new travel law and the Berlin Wall came down, the changes that had taken place so far became irreversible.

FORMS OF NON-VIOLENT PROTEST

Every individual who protested against a decision or participated in a protest action had to consider means of protest that ranged from highly provocative to non-provocative forms of action. The task was to carry on political aims without giving the GDR state any reason to take action against the protesters, although the question as to whether an action was provocative or not cannot be answered without considering the particular situation and the conditions state decision-makers were in. State responses to either highly provocative or barely provocative actions seemed arbitrary. Pollack⁵ draws a distinction between a rational type of protest action, that is an action that conforms to the norms of the GDR state, and an expressive type of action, a term referring to actions that went beyond such rigid limitations. Examples of such actions on the individual level can be derived from interviews: whereas to leave the SED, to make an official complaint, to place a candle at the window or to gather at church premises – although these actions could result in disadvantages – were legal, distributing illegal publications and participating in illegal demonstrations were criminalised and punished. The first kind of actions can be characterised as low-cost actions since the risk to be sanctioned was rather small, whereas the second kind of behaviour is to be described as

high-cost action. From the rational choice perspective, the individual chooses an action that costs as little as possible and maximises the intended aim. Therefore high-cost actions, which were highly provocative or even included violent aspects, were less likely to be deployed.

A form of non-violent legal (low-cost) protest used by many groups and individuals were appeals sent to the state and SED officials. In some cases, they were taken into consideration by the state; in most cases they were just rejected or never answered. Usually, the applicants did not suffer any punishment; the appeal, however, was recorded in their Stasi file. Grix⁶ categorises critical but not overtly political actions like complaints (*Eingaben*), readers' letters, critical notes or 'wall papers' in factories as civic activities that are expressions of a replacement public sphere. Such forms of protest were even used by workers who – in the eyes of Fuller⁷ – did not engage in any important activity during the events in 1989.

Most of the groups were involved in less provocative grassroots and parish work which included the organisation of parish and group meetings, weekly peace prayers, evening briefing sessions (e.g. on environmental issues) and the printing and distribution of parish publications. Weekly peace prayers were held in the Leipzig Nikolai Church from 1982 and annual peace workshops (*Friedensdekaden*) also took place.

The fear that actions might provoke police reprisals becomes clear when considering symbolic acts. To stand in front of a church and hold a candle, to plant a tree or to clean forests was in many cases seen as a provocation of state officials and treated as such. For example, the government prohibited the wearing of the patch *Schwerter zu Pflugscharen*. Mainly thematic groups tried creative forms of protest that never went beyond the bounds of the law. They gathered on their bicycles and rode through the streets. Some groups organised picnics in parks. Often even such symbolic events were prohibited by the state officials. So the appeal to register the Leipzig *Pleissegedenkmarsch* (commemorative walk for the river Pleisse) was rejected by state officials. The initiators saw this project – just under the threshold of illegality – as a walk from one church to another along the river Pleisse which was highly polluted and poisoned by the GDR chemical industry. The *Strassenmusikfestival* (street music festival) was another attempt to protest legally and non-violently. But, as the state felt provoked by this festival, the event was prohibited and broken up by the police. One hundred people were arrested by the police, under a law that meant street musicians were illegal in the GDR.

The most provocative and rather high-cost non-violent actions were illegal public demonstrations, candle-light marches or chains of people. The first real opposition demonstrations took place in October and November of 1988. They lasted no longer than a few minutes, as the Stasi broke them up immediately. To inform the GDR people of the real situation within their country, the

groups used word-of-mouth, printed and distributed illegal publications (e.g., *Der Grenzfall*) and informed the West German media about events. For example, in September 1986, the Environmental Library of the Berlin Zion's Church began editing an illegal independent journal called *Umweltblätter* (environmental leaflets). One year later, the Stasi arrested people who participated in the production and distribution of this journal and confiscated printing machines. The wearing of alternative banners or symbols on official state demonstrations and a hunger strike at the Berlin Gethsemane Church were also perceived as highly provocative by the state. In 1987, for example, many members of opposition groups were arrested as they attended an official demonstration in the memory of Luxemburg and Liebknecht wearing banners with quotations by Luxemburg that referred to freedom of speech and thought. Most of the opposition groups refrained from such provocative actions as they did not want to give the state any reason to criminalise them and arrest or even expel participants.

In summary, it can be said that the means and the aims of protest were more or less dependent on the limitations set by the state and experiences of state responses to protest actions. Their opportunities were diverse within the sphere of the Lutheran Church, but very limited outside. A typical pattern was a mixture of adaptation and deviation, that is, in the words of Detlef Pollack, a 'calculated norm violation'.⁸

THE ROLE OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS GROUPS AND THE LUTHERAN CHURCH AT THE TIME OF THE *WENDE*

Before exploring the role of opposition groups and the church, it is necessary to analyse external and internal factors on the societal level that caused the *Wende* in 1989. Following Pollack, the main cause inside the system was the increase in contradictions and tensions of GDR society, namely (a) the contradiction between the occurrence of broader margins and the effort to tighten the ideological propaganda and the expansion of the Stasi system to control these new margins, (b) the problem of supplying consumer goods, and (c) the fact that the GDR system could not maintain its status as a closed system. The economic crisis inside the GDR system increased dramatically with the result that the state had to accept massive loans from West Germany in the mid-1980s. Childs points out that due to economic problems (inadequate supply of goods, inadequate housing stock, etc.) in the face of 'glamorous' West Germany, the development of a separate GDR identity was blocked. Consequently only 28 per cent of young people identified themselves as 'proud citizens' of the GDR in a study conducted by the GDR Zentrales Institut für Jugendforschung (Central Institute for Research on Youth) in May 1988.⁹ Threats to the GDR system also came from West

German media which was available to most of the GDR population, the new policy of 'Glasnost and Perestroika' in the Soviet Union under Gorbachev in the late 1980s and the opening of the Hungarian–Austrian border in mid-1989 which led to an enormous exodus.

Finally, the mass movement occurring in October 1989 and the concomitant social changes can be traced to the unequal distribution of power and decision-making competence over decades, the rising dissatisfaction with the economic situation¹⁰ and – as the civil rights protagonists Bohley and Birthler put it – that everything was 'wrapped in silence'.¹¹ Because individuals shared many experiences, the mass protest developed spontaneously. Thus the mass protest movement is rooted in the homogeneity of the social situation in which most of the GDR people lived, rather than opposition groups. What brought individuals to join the mass protest on the streets was a desire for change and to create a public sphere. Although the changes can be traced to several causes, the irreversibility of these changes is to the merit of the peaceful protesters.¹²

Opposition groups and the Lutheran Church were important internal threats to the system, although both 'hardly sufficed to bring down the Communist regime'.¹³ The role of the opposition groups was not confined to the time of the *Wende*, as the growth of civil rights and environmental groups during the 1970s and 1980s had a great impact on the developments of 1989.¹⁴ Pollack sees the Lutheran Church and the alternative groups as crystallisation points.¹⁵ They functioned as catalysts for the protest. The churches offered places, times and occasions for people to meet like-minded people (e.g., peace prayer on Mondays at 5 pm at Nikolai Church in Leipzig). The opposition groups became symbols of mass protest, as they had dealt with forms of protest against the ruling system for decades. And both the church and the groups supported the communication within the country. Topics appeared on the agendas of the people that co-workers, students or even families did not talk about before.

GDR society was characterised by a lack of independent social and political associations for interest representation.¹⁶ The church was the only organisation that was not part of the GDR system of parties and mass organisations and was therefore relatively autonomous, so that it was to become a reservoir for alternative political powers, even if it never identified itself as opposition.¹⁷ Most of the opposition groups were sheltered by the Lutheran Church. In certain parishes such groups were barely tolerated, whereas other parishes gave them the support they needed. The East German Roman Catholic Church did not support the protests and the process of change as much as the Protestant Lutheran Church did. This may be due to the more submissive attitude of East German Catholic institutions and people, but also to the smaller number of Catholics in the GDR. In 1985, the Lutheran

Church had 6.95 million members, whereas there were only 1.2 million Roman Catholics.¹⁸

The role of the churches was highly equivocal. There were strong ties between opposition groups and parish or church groups, but this does not apply to the relationship between the upper levels of the church structure and the opposition groups, as the actors on these levels were only concerned with church interests rather than changing the GDR system. On the one hand, the church functioned as a protective umbrella for alternative groups and gave them a platform to articulate their aims in public to a certain extent. Some parishes provided rooms for meetings of peace, civil rights and environmental groups. The church also financed alternative research like the environmental studies of the Church Research Institute Wittenberg. The Lutheran Church also provided protection against state actions. Church officials negotiated with state officials to free political prisoners and reached several agreements, for example, that church members were not systematically discriminated against in the selection of school students for secondary education. But, on the other hand, the church was not always supportive. Even if it is usually spoken of as 'the Church', the great variability from 'area to area, parish to parish, within any of the regional Churches, depending on the views and personalities of particular pastors and their support or otherwise from regional leaders'¹⁹ must not be neglected. The state, the SED and the Stasi always tried and often managed to infiltrate church structures and to influence church officials. As a result several former members of opposition groups report that they were victims of Stasi spies within the church or of conspiratorial agreements between the church and state officials. Several parishes banned the opposition groups from using their premises. As Pollack reports, the Saxonian Lutheran Church stopped the scholarship of a student at the Leipzig Theological College when he became, in their eyes, too deeply engaged in opposition activities. There was an interdependency between the state and the church, so state officials often criticised the role of the church and its support of opposition groups. The church responded by restricting the development of such groups within church premises and called off some workshops. In some cases, the reserve of the church can also be traced to religious reasons. Some church officials calmed the protests by referring to God and his attempts to change the situation in the GDR, and therefore supported passivity.

Before the autumn of 1989, the effective range of the opposition groups did not go much beyond the church sphere. There was not much contact between the people of the GDR and these groups. Instead, the members of politically alternative groups – who were mainly left-wing intellectuals with a highly moral value system – were seen as 'day dreamers' or 'anarchists'.²⁰ Members of civil rights groups often lived in flat-sharing communities and did not work in factories.²¹ Some opposition groups – like the network

Frauen für den Frieden (Women for Peace) founded in 1981 – tried to get out of the shelter of the church and change society directly. But, their actions (e.g., distributing leaflets, silent protest marches, chains of people) were often prevented by the Stasi and many people arrested, so even those groups had to use the church infrastructure to survive and to recruit new members.

In contrast to others who stress the systemic contradictions, Neubert emphasises the important role of the opposition groups in the late 1980s: ‘The opposition did delegitimise the SED dictatorship, did create conditions for democratisation and did enforce the opening of the political system.’ The opposition groups forced the SED and the party block to give up their power peacefully and lawfully.²² The main functions of the opposition groups are characterised by the subjects interviewed as the uncovering of abuses (e.g., the election fraud of the SED), the organisation of the protests, the articulation of the needs and wishes of the people of the GDR and eventually the surmounting of the fears of many GDR citizens to speak out. Different functions of action-oriented and subject-related thematic groups were crucial for the political upheaval in East Germany. Whereas the first group initiated communication within the GDR people through provocative actions, the latter discussed the situation of society and the environment and formed a factual basis for protest. As the crisis in GDR society increased and the action potential of the GDR state became – due to the open Hungarian border, the lack of support by the Soviet Union, and a lack of spontaneity of the GDR’s leading gerontocracy²³ – more and more limited, the opposition groups became able to act outside the church sphere, reach a new and more formalised quality and unite with the GDR people for protest. A special ingredient was the opposition group Neues Forum which focused different political concerns into a common denominator – ‘There are problems. We need to talk about them’ – offering a network to disseminate information and organisational abilities to canalise the pressure coming from the people of the GDR.²⁴ According to the study of Grix,²⁵ Neues Forum and other opposition groups built a bridge between private sphere (niche society), replacement public sphere (e.g. working sphere) and, eventually, new public sphere. The groups initiated and catalysed civic activity. As Lemke²⁶ points out, there were contradictions between the official political culture and the ‘dominant political culture’ that was determining people’s everyday life. Whereas over decades the state could maintain a power balance between both spheres by ideological education and Stasi actions, the gap increased during the 1980s as the generation which experienced World War II and the foundation of the GDR was increasingly replaced by a younger generation which could not identify with the official GDR culture and was not willing to sustain isolation, lack of consumer goods and political subjection.

The relevance of the groups reached its highest level between autumn of 1989 and spring of 1990, even if they were in most cases neither the initiators nor the organisers of the mass demonstrations.²⁷ Both the opposition groups and the church prevented violence during the changes in 1989. Appeals were directed to the people and the police to act non-violently. Opposition group members even attended demonstrations as security guards to avoid any violent action. The groups were integrated into the caretaker government and the 'round tables' led by church officials where opposition groups, GDR parties and other organisations met to discuss problems and solutions. The groups worked out new laws and even a new constitution. But, as the West German parliamentary and party system was carried across to eastern Germany and the only democratic GDR parliament was elected in March 1990, the time of the 'round table talks' and of the opposition groups had passed.

The reason for the decline of the former opposition groups is to be found in the differences between the GDR people and opposition group members. When some of the goals shared by both the people and the opposition groups were achieved (e.g., the fall of the Berlin Wall, abolition of the Stasi, introduction of free elections), the division between intellectual civil rights activists and average members of the public recurred. Whereas most GDR citizens wanted to enjoy stable prosperity symbolised by 'bananas and fast cars' as soon as possible, the opposition groups started to argue about the future of a democratic and humanist GDR. They wanted to democratise GDR society. Instead, the GDR was joined with West Germany on 3 October 1990, since during the first democratic election in March 1990 the majority of the East German people had voted for parties standing for rapid unification.

The civil rights movement also broke apart over different notions of what a democratic state should be like, what role the opposition groups should play in the new Germany, and how to deal with GDR history, with the PDS (former SED) and with the Stasi files. Neubert²⁸ states that the GDR opposition movement was always as varied as the whole GDR society. The theoretical concepts of the opposition groups ranged from critical Marxist views and anarchic ideas to religion-based social ethics. Some members of the former opposition groups joined traditional West German parties (e.g., Angela Merkel, CDU), others prepared for the unification of the West and East German alternative movement into the party 'Bündnis 90/Die Grünen' (e.g., Marianne Birthler), expressed strong sympathies with the PDS (e.g., Jutta Braband), or did not join any party (e.g., Bärbel Bohley). Many protagonists of the *Wende* withdrew from any political involvement, as the change brought lots of new opportunities for self-expression and creativity so that political engagement lost its peculiarity (*Entzauberung*).²⁹ A majority of the former protagonists

maintained a distrust of formal institutions and therefore kept a critical distance to the traditional West German party system. Most subjects interviewed report that their feelings of efficacy reached their highest levels in late 1989. After unification, opportunities to participate became fewer.

WHY DID THE SITUATION IN OCTOBER 1989 NOT EXPLODE?

Before exploring this question, the theory of planned behaviour (TOPB)³⁰ that is usually used in quantitative empirical research and shares several characteristics with the theoretical paradigm of rational choice will be introduced in brief as a theoretical background for hermeneutic reason. TOPB assumes that the perceived limitations of a situation (perceived behavioural control), the perceived norms of significant others (subjective norms) and the attitudes towards the particular behaviour (attitudes) determine the intention of an individual to perform a particular action (e.g., violent protest). Concerning non-violent political protest, TOPB suggests that non-violent behaviour is not just backed by non-violent religious or humanist values and attitudes, but also by the perception that others share the same attitudes, and the perception that the perceived characteristics of the situation (e.g., superiority of the police and Stasi) allow or require non-violent actions.

Police, Stasi and Army

Several traces of violence on the side of the government can be identified. Members of civil rights groups and conscientious objectors were treated very badly. Even when there was no direct violence, mental violence was deployed. Dissidents were picked up at home for questioning at police or Stasi premises. Police suppressed demonstrations by using truncheons and water cannons. Dogs were used to intimidate people. Internal Stasi reports confirm the use of such means.³¹ Often protesters were beaten by undercover Stasi agents at demonstrations, and when they were arrested, the police would often pull their hair. Other dissidents, like Susanne Buechner, report they were not allowed to go to the toilet or to sit down for hours during questionings.

However, during the wave of protest in autumn 1989, the police, army and Stasi did not deploy their guns. The commission for the liquidation of the Stasi confirms several records showing that the GDR leadership was ready to stop all the people's protests in 1989. Police and Stasi were prepared to install a police state. There are lists with names of people who were to be deported to internment camps. But due to the non-cooperation of some police and army units and the fact that even some SED officials had been arrested by accident, the catastrophe failed to materialise. One rumour is that the Soviet Union also intervened to stop the police and army units.

To explore some more detailed reasons for the relative peacefulness of the state, the events in Leipzig on 9 October 1989 will now be explored. On this Monday, a peace prayer was again to take place at the Leipzig Nikolai Church. As usual, the prayer was to be followed by a huge protest march. But days before it became clear that the GDR state was not ready to tolerate the demonstration. Opposition groups and pastors warned the people against possible police and army operations and demanded strict peacefulness. During the demonstration, an appeal by the so-called 'Leipzig Six' – a pastor, three members of the Leipzig SED district leadership, the head of the Leipzig Gewandhaus (concert hall) and a cabaret artist – to keep the peace was read out. It was a frightening atmosphere, but nevertheless tens of thousands of people attended the prayer and the demonstration. Many families had decided that only one of the parents should attend this demonstration, so that in the event of any accident there was still one parent left at home to care for the children. In a side-street near Leipzig Central Station, the police and their bulldozers stood by to stop the protests physically. At least some of the armed security people were willing to 'defend socialism' by using their firearms. Fortunately, they did not receive a combat order. Head of the Leipzig SED Hackenberg was ready to give the order to start a bloody inferno, but as three other SED head officials had joined the 'Leipzig Six', there was discord. Hackenberg could not decide and had to wait for a legitimisation of this order by superiors. As a result he could not act swiftly. Orders from the Berlin SED headquarters failed to arrive. High state official Egon Krenz phoned the head of the Zentralinstitut für Jugendforschung (GDR Social Science Institute of Youth Research), Walter Friedrich, to ask him what to do. Friedrich recommended a non-violent solution. Due to these particular conditions, the catastrophe was prevented and the Stasi had to record that 'prepared measures to prevent and suppress were not used, due to the development of the situation'.³²

According to Opp *et al.*,³³ Pollack³⁴ and Fulbrook,³⁵ the following reasons for the peacefulness by the state can be identified on the individual level and on the societal level; first, the members of the police, army and Stasi acted against their own moral feelings when deploying violence and aggression. In view of the non-violent behaviour of the members of the opposition groups and other protesters, they had no moral right to intervene violently. Second, due to the policy of Glasnost and Perestroika in the Soviet Union, the GDR government could no longer expect any military support from the Soviet Union for the suppression of demonstrations. The local GDR authorities were not ready to make decisions, as they never really had to before. The leadership was split into reformers and hardliners. Third, there was an international legitimisation problem. If the GDR had fought against its own people, the state would have been punished internationally. Economic

sanctions against East Germany would have soon led to the end of its existence. Fourth, the police and the Stasi did not expect so many protesters (70–100,000 on 9 October in Leipzig). Security people also feared injuries in the event of police action and therefore withdrew.

Motives of Protesters to Act in a Non-Violent Way

Civil rights groups rarely acted in a violent way, although there were differences in how provocative protest actions might be. One aspect that helps explain the absence of violent protest lies in the people's socialisation. Activists of the civil rights movement were church-linked. Most of them came from a Christian background and used the facilities churches offered them. The first activities and gatherings of civil rights groups took place in response to the continuing militarisation of the GDR. The protest was directed against the introduction of military subjects into schools and the imposition of military service. Due to these factors, values of non-violence belong to the roots and the core ideology of the movement. For the non-violence of the demonstrators during the autumn of 1989, this explanation is not as directly relevant, as the majority of those participants – and the GDR citizens in general – did not come out of the church or the alternative scene. Opp *et al.*³⁶ point out that the peacefulness of the GDR people is not due to Christian ethics, but perhaps to a socialist ideology of peace and peacefulness which was not respected by the police or Stasi, but imparted in schools.

But there are also tactical and rational motives for non-violence. To gain and to keep the support of the East German people, the opposition groups had to act in a peaceful way. They demonstrated and symbolised their peacefulness by carrying candles and by sitting down on the floor. Even when people got arrested, pulled by their hair and thrown into police vehicles, they did not fight back. This was to show that violence is a characteristic of the Stasi, the army and the police, but not of opposition groups. So the non-violent attitude was a tactical means to gain credibility and to promote their aims.

Another aspect is related to tactics rather than to values. So environmentalist Roland Quester cites Gandhi and compares the situation to the peaceful revolution in India. He says that there was no opportunity to use any violence. Non-violence is often not a question of philosophy. Gandhi himself said about the events in India that it was just not possible to go beyond non-violent protest with the starving Indian people. In the GDR, the superiority of the state and its forces criminalised even the smallest illegal efforts. To prevent any criminalisation and possible reprisals, civil rights activists had to act legally. Direct violence or other non-peaceful actions had led to the use of force by the state and to imprisonment. The superiority of the state forces left no space for any violent revolution. This thesis becomes even more

plausible if one refers to an observation by Pollack³⁷ that the offers of reform by the state officials in 1989 – meant to calm the protests – led to an increase in protests and demonstrations. The concessions of the state had an influence on the perception of what was possible in the situation. So the protesters recognised that they could demand even more without being punished and with a higher likelihood of achieving their goals. However, values and attitudes and the still strong state forces prevented the people from deploying violent means of protest.

The most important emotional cause of peaceful behaviour was fear. People were afraid of injuries, pain and suffering. They feared reprisals and imprisonment which would separate them from their friends, relatives or children. Some former protesters mention this fear as a specific cultural characteristic. They see the majority of Germans as timid and therefore peaceful people and think that such a political upheaval could have followed a more violent course if it had taken place for example in France. East German dissident and Neues Forum initiator, Rolf Henrich, explains the occurrence of fears by referring to the ‘guardian state’. On the one hand, the GDR government dealt extremely thoughtfully with its citizens. In institutions like schools or youth organisations, the state tried to integrate every person into society and to provide everybody with good prospects. On the other hand, the state imposed its will on its citizens. It was difficult to drop out of the individual role the state had moulded for each person. This policy mix of caring and reprisal supported the internalisation of fears by individuals.³⁸

The peacefulness of the demonstrators was also a result of appeals by the church and the opposition groups to protest without violence. The Neues Forum distributed leaflets demanding peacefulness. A leaflet by several church opposition groups – distributed before and during the Leipzig Monday demonstration on 9 October 1989 – contains the following ideas and demands: ‘Violence produces violence. Violence cannot solve any problem. Violence is inhuman. Violence cannot be a sign of a new, better society. [...] Abstain from any violence! Do not break any police chains, keep some distance for the cordons! [...] Do not throw any objects and abstain from violent slogans!’³⁹ The initiators also asked the members of the security forces to abstain from responding to peacefulness with violence. At another demonstration, members of opposition groups stood in front of the building of the Leipzig Stasi to prevent possible attacks. Attackers were isolated and asked to leave the crowd.

The alternative groups attended several anti-violence seminars. During these training sessions, initiated by pastors and group leaders, the protesters saw films on Martin Luther King and Gandhi and learned how to behave in the event of being arrested. Even then, they were not allowed to deploy violent means. They were asked to sit down and give their names. The

Leipzig Pastor Wagner describes the peace prayers as ‘resting points’ where attendants were filled with peace before going out to demonstrate.⁴⁰ In contradiction, Pollack⁴¹ states that there were also church meetings with quite a volatile atmosphere. As many people had been suppressing their discontent for decades, there was a great desire to express these feelings in extreme ways.

In Dresden, about 200 protesters, mainly people who wanted to leave the country, threw paving stones at the station building and the police at a demonstration at the beginning of October of 1989. Police responded by throwing stones back. Dissident Uwe Schwabe remembers another situation when the protesters left the path of non-violence. In February of 1989, he attended a demonstration commemorating the bombing of Dresden in World War II. Ten policemen and members of the Stasi wanted to arrest a woman carrying an illegal banner. A policeman caught the woman, but another protester rescued her by slapping the face of the officer. These are exceptions, however. Nevertheless some people would have liked to deploy more forceful means to break the power of the ruling party SED and the Stasi.

From a rational perspective it can again be concluded that highly provocative opposition activity resulted in high costs. Therefore protesters more frequently engaged in protest actions that they recognised as rather ‘cheap’ in particular situations. The decision to adhere to non-violent forms of protest was also supported by the norms of the social environment (friends, groups, church parishes) and values of peacefulness.

PEOPLE

To illustrate the events before and after the *Wende* and the questions raised in this article, I shall now turn back to the interviewed people and their biographies. The examples show how people coped with their life and its difficulties in the GDR. To these analyses of motives of peaceful behaviour, members of civil rights groups are as important as ‘ordinary’ people who did not engage in protest groups.

A main resource of an analytic and scientific view on the events in the GDR in the 1980s and in particular on the church and opposition groups is Detlef Pollack⁴² who is now Professor of Cultural Studies at the European University Viadrina in Frankfurt (Oder). He started to deal with GDR opposition groups in 1986, being himself a member of a discussion group called ‘Oekumene und Gerechtigkeit’ (Ecumenical Movement and Justice). The group, which consisted of students from the Protestant Leipzig Theological College discussed the problems of GDR society and the church system, but did not go beyond sending a letter with comments to the ecumenical assembly in 1988. It was not an action group, but members were part of other groups which did engage in protest action. Pollack did not see himself as an activist,

but as an analyst. He interviewed members of this and other groups. During the changes in 1989, he attended demonstrations and peace prayers, noting a restless and sometimes dangerous atmosphere at such gatherings.

A member of a Leipzig church group was cabinet-maker and environmental adviser Roland Quester,⁴³ who is currently head of the Leipzig Environmental Library and a representative of the Green Party at the Leipzig municipal council. He became involved with the church-based Arbeitsgruppe Umweltschutz (Ecology Study Group) in 1986. The first action he took was to carry a banner against the use of nuclear power at the official Worker's Day demonstration following the Chernobyl catastrophe in the Soviet Union. From 1988, he worked full time for this environmental group and was paid by private donations from other group members. The main aim of his group was to inform the public by producing and distributing illegal publications, organising monthly events on church premises, and arranging seminars on environmental issues. The group also carried out practical activities like planting trees and caring for protected plants. Quester notes that all these actions can hardly be called protest actions, even when they were understood this way by state officials. Quester was arrested several times and suffered direct violence when police attacked the first Monday Demonstration with water cannons and truncheons. But, like his companions, he never fought back. In Quester's eyes, violence was and still is no way to protest against anything. The overpowering GDR state saw all forms of peaceful protest as criminal offences. There was no need, and no opportunity, to take further action to wake up the state.

Uwe Schwabe⁴⁴ who is currently the official in charge of the investigation at the Leipzig Museum Zeitgeschichtliches Forum (Forum of Contemporary History) worked as a male nurse in a church institution in the 1980s. Since the church institutions were relatively autonomous, he was able to remove himself from the influence of the GDR state. He became involved with a youth parish group at the Leipzig Nikolai Church in 1984 and was enthusiastic about the opportunity to discuss political matters frankly. After a seminar on peace, he became a member of the Arbeitsgruppe Umweltschutz. In 1987, he established the new opposition group Initiativgruppe Leben (Life Action Group), because he and his fellows were not satisfied with the Arbeitsgruppe Umweltschutz policy of using only legal means of protest. This policy was – in Schwabe's eyes – too much influenced by the state policy and laws. The new action group wanted to act outside the church environment. The aim was to reach the people and to push topics like human rights onto their agendas by non-violent means. In order to achieve this they distributed leaflets and organised demonstrations; once they presented flowers to policemen to show their non-violent intentions. Church pastors often warned them about the response of the state and a possible deployment of Russian troops

against such actions (remembering the state's response to events in 1953). Schwabe was on remand for ten days in January 1989 and recalls being subjected to mental torture. However, he did not feel hatred for the security people who had to question or observe him; they had to do their jobs and – he notes ironically – also suffered when they had to stand around in the cold while watching his flat.

Juergen Lessig⁴⁵ is one of the few people who did not accept the decisions made by GDR officials, although he was not a member of an opposition group. For religious reasons, he decided to do unarmed alternative military service. Despite threats by teachers, army officials and others, he managed to get a place at a university after a major struggle. Lessig applied to study crystallography, but did not get a place. As he had the best marks in school and the number of applicants was smaller than the number of places on the crystallography course, it is clear that his rejection was a matter of discrimination. Later, Lessig was awarded a place on a chemistry course at a university in another town, but the army administration delayed his conscription until his place expired. Army officials told him, if he was not ready to serve the GDR with arms, he could not expect to be supported in his life choices. Lessig sent an appeal to the Ministry of Defence. After several summonses, army officials conscripted him and remitted the passed time. Unarmed alternative military service was a crucial experience for Lessig, as he and the other conscripts were treated 'like scum'. Lessig left the socialist youth organisation FDJ during his time in the army. In response, his place on the chemistry course was revoked. He appealed against this decision and won. During his early days at the university he was summoned by university officials who told him to refrain from any oppositional activity and from talking about his time doing alternative service in the army and about leaving the youth organisation. Later the Stasi tried to recruit Lessig because of his contacts with dissidents, but he rejected these efforts. In the spring of 1989, he attended peace prayers and demonstrations. He left his free church parish and became a member of the Arbeitsgruppe Homosexualität (Homosexuality Study Group) in the Leipzig Protestant student parish.

Susanne Buechner⁴⁶ was a schoolgirl in the 1980s. She lived in a village near Berlin. She attended meetings of an environmental group within the Protestant Church. Close to the end of her school days, at the age of 16, she and her mother were asked to visit the headmaster, who told them that they should not even try to apply for A-level education. He explained this with reference to Susanne's lack of socialist socio-political activity. So she served an apprenticeship with a publishing house and became a library assistant. She visited the Environmental Library in Berlin. Buechner got into trouble, as she tried to copy illegal publications by environmental church groups in her office. She and her mother were again summoned in front of a

commission including an official of the SED party. After finishing her apprenticeship in May 1989, Susanne Buechner was attracted to the new policy of Glasnost and Perestroika and worked for three months in the Soviet Union, but she became utterly disappointed on realising that Russian society could not provide an example for reforms in the GDR. After her return to Germany in September 1989, she worked as a librarian and archives employee at the publishing house Tourist Verlag in Berlin. She attended several meetings of parish groups. She was solidly behind people in the Gethsemane Church when they staged a hunger-strike to protest against the bloody police and army action in China. Buechner also joined small illegal demonstrations, often carrying a candle. On 7 October 1989, she went to a demonstration at Gethsemane Church. Soon, police were storming the building. Some people, including Susanne Buechner, were arrested while trying to flee. Buechner was released the next day. After the political upheaval in 1989, she made up for her secondary education. When asked about the reasons for her non-violent path, she mentions fear and shock. She was so shocked by the violence of the state that she could only react by running away. On the other hand, she was very uncertain about the ideal social order and felt great confusion at this time. However, she recognises the success of non-violent action which attracted attention, support and commitment from an increasing number of people. So Buechner reports that after some residents of Berlin Prenzlauer Berg had placed candles in their windows, the number of windows where candles appeared rose daily.

There were also people trying to improve and change the situation in the GDR from inside the socialist system who became utterly disappointed upon recognising the rigidity of the system. One of those people is the English teacher at Leipzig University, Christiane Kwasnitza.⁴⁷ She was brought up in a church environment since her father was a Lutheran pastor. She married a pro-communist man and lived in Berlin, working as a reader at the Berlin Kinderbuchverlag (Children's Books Publishing House) from the mid-1970s until the beginning of the 1980s. She got to know Gundula Bahro, the former wife of writer Rudolf Bahro, who tried to change the system from inside the Communist Party (SED). Kwasnitza joined the ruling GDR party as well. She wanted to be integrated into GDR society and to improve it, but soon became disappointed. Rudolf Bahro was imprisoned because of his critical book *Die Alternative*. His wife lost her managerial post at the Kinderbuchverlag. Christiane Kwasnitza moved to Leipzig and started working as an English teacher at the Karl Marx University of Leipzig. She wanted to leave the Communist Party, but was scared to lose her job and to suffer other reprisals. So she contacted Gottfried Hänisch, head of the Leipzig Protestant Deacony (board for parish services). He and the Saxonian bishop backed her leaving the party in 1983. She did not lose her job, but was

not allowed to talk to her students or colleagues about this event. She tried to run her English courses in a liberal manner and create niches where free discussion could take place. Very much appreciated by theology and humanity students, she was criticised and threatened by others, mainly student SED members. When her father became ill and died in West Germany, she was not allowed to visit him. During the peaceful revolution, she attended most of the peace prayers and the Monday demonstrations from September 1989, but did not join the opposition groups because she was much too afraid of suffering reprisals. She talks about her experiences near Nikolai Church as 'nightmares', for example, when the area was blocked off, police with dogs were cruising through the streets and people had to present their ID cards even for using the university toilet.

CONCLUSION

The reasons why the changes in 1989 happened in a peaceful way can be traced to two sources: (a) humanist values of the majority of the GDR people and in particular the opposition groups that had close links to churches, and (b) rational motives that can be understood by detailed analyses of particular situations. Opposition group members like Uwe Schwabe and Roland Quester dealt very much with the issue of peacefulness in their groups. The notion of peacefulness, as the opposite of Nazism and imperialism, was even taught in the schools of the GDR, so that the non-violent ideal was passed on from generation to generation. It is not true in all cases that these non-violent values were rooted in Christianity. There were also rational and tactical reasons to act non-violently since the state forces were superior and the opposition groups wanted to maintain a widely accepted humanist image.

So only a small number of the *Wende* protagonists can be called pacifists, because rational reasons to act non-violently (e.g., superiority of the state or lack of skills) could also be identified in this analysis. The terms 'pacifism' and 'non-violent action' must not be equated, although they are strongly related. Pacifism is an ideology that strictly condemns any use of violence and demands an absolute commitment to peace. Pacifist ideology does not ask for the causes of arguments or armed conflicts, but condemns military aggression as well as defence measures employed by liberation movements.

Analyses of human protest behaviour should always contain both rational explanations (considering people's preferences, restrictions of the situation, etc.) and socialisation assumptions (values, attitudes, etc.). The situational factors must be analysed in terms of the perception of the people, as the Thomas theorem⁴⁸ suggests: 'If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences'.

This article ends with a very important thought from Juergen Lessig. In the interview, he pointed out that most of the GDR people were much too intimidated by sometimes true and sometimes untrue rumours about reprisals. The so-called *Schere im Kopf* (scissors inside the head) led to a submissiveness which was not necessary. Most GDR citizens did not even try to deviate a single step from the official course and deploy legal and possible forms of protest (e.g. appeals) as they were afraid of being marked as dissidents by the Stasi or by other official organisations. For example, Christiane Kwasnitza refrained from any oppositional activity because she had to raise her children and did not want to risk being arrested and torn away from her family. Therefore, the main goal of the members of opposition, church and alternative groups was the destruction of the fears of the majority of the GDR people.

NOTES

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40. Opp *et al.*, *Die volkseigene Revolution*.
41. Detlef Pollack, interview, 7 July 2000.
42. Detlef Pollack was interviewed at his office at the European University Viadrina at Frankfurt/Oder on 7 July 2000.
43. The interview with Roland Quester took place on 30 June 2000 at the Leipzig Environmental Library at the House of Democracy in Leipzig, Connewitz, Bernhard Goering Strasse.
44. The interview with Uwe Schwabe took place on 9 October 2000 at his office at the Zeitgeschichtliches Forum (Forum of Contemporary History) in Leipzig, Grimmaische Strasse.
45. Juergen Lessig was interviewed on 8 August 2000 at his wine shop in Leipzig, Lindenau, Hebelstrasse.
46. Susanne Buechner (name was changed by the author) was interviewed on 18 September 2000 at the café *Sowohl als auch* in Berlin, Prenzlauer Berg, Kollwitzstrasse.
47. Kristiane Kwasnitza was interviewed on 15 July 2000 in her private flat in Leipzig, Lindenau.
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