

4.2 "WE ARE THE PEOPLE" — PEACEFUL REVOLUTION IN LEIPZIG 1989

? FOCUS QUESTION:

- What circumstances influence people to choose peaceful demonstrations over other methods in order to bring about political change?

STANDARD #2 TIME, CONTINUITY AND CHANGE.

STANDARD #6 POWER, AUTHORITY AND GOVERNANCE.

STANDARD #10 CIVIC IDEALS AND PRACTICES.

LESSON OVERVIEW:

The peaceful demonstrations held in Leipzig in former East Germany during the fall of 1989 contributed to the collapse of the SED/Honecker regime of the GDR. Understanding the peaceful focus of this protest and the spontaneous eruption of massive participation is an excellent case study in civil disobedience, in the tradition of the demonstrations of Mahatma Gandhi in India or the Civil Rights Movement led by Martin Luther King, Jr. in the United States. The reaction of the East German police stands in marked contrast to the Chinese response in Tiananmen Square in Beijing, China in the spring of 1989. Students will be able to identify the factors that led to massive protest and the factors that led to police restraint. They will review documents (text and visual) in a Document-Based Question (DBQ) and be asked to write a five-paragraph essay. In addition, students have the opportunity to review the events of October 9, 1989 and compare and contrast them with other examples of peaceful demonstrations.

TEACHER BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

What began as weekly prayer and discussion meetings at Leipzig's Nicholas Church in 1983 evolved into larger gatherings of regime dissidents eager to talk about a variety of topics ranging from environmental protection to the right to travel freely. During the mid-1980s, Mikhail Gorbachev, leader of the Soviet Union (1985-91), introduced the policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, which resulted in significant improvements in the totalitarian Soviet Union. This signaled new hope for satellite nations such as Poland, which had attempted to create more openness through the actions of *Solidarity* – its trade union federation. This increased liberalization resulted in free elections in Poland in 1989, based on the hope the Soviet regime would not challenge the results. During the summer of 1989, the border between Austria and Hungary was opened. Over the course of the fall – now known as the *Leipziger Herbst* (or "Leipzig Fall") – East German citizens from all walks of life took to the streets every Monday evening to demand freedom and democracy.



The *Montagsdemonstrationen* (Monday Demonstrations) grew from just hundreds to hundreds of thousands within a few weeks. October 7, 1989 marked the official commemoration of the 40th anniversary of the GDR. Two days later, the people of Leipzig turned out in masses and initiated the so-called Peaceful Revolution of 1989. Despite the efforts of the *Stasi* and the East German police to stop these activities through any force possible, the decision not to open fire at the demonstrators seemed to be as spontaneous as the protests themselves. The SED regime also made several other unsuccessful attempts to suppress the mounting desire for change. As a result, within *one* month, the Berlin Wall collapsed and with it the German Democratic Republic (Schmemmann, 1989).

For further reference, the teacher should read the articles available in the 4.2 Teacher Background Information (**Handout 4.2.4 on Instructional Resource Disc**).

TIME:



(2-3) 45 minute class periods

INSTRUCTIONAL RESOURCES:

- Peaceful Revolution PowerPoint (**PowerPoint 4.2.1 on Instructional Resource Disc**)
- Interviews with Irmtraud Hollitzer and Tobias Hollitzer (**Handout 4.2.2 on Instructional Resource Disc**)
- Peaceful Revolution Document-Based Question (**Handout 4.2.3 on Instructional Resource Disc**)
- 4.2 Teacher Background Information Articles (**Handout 4.2.4 on Instructional Resource Disc**)

PROCEDURE:



DAYS 1-2:

ANTICIPATORY SET: The teacher should ask the students to explain the ways by which citizens have expressed their dissatisfaction with their governments (the answers should range from letters to the editor, to voting out legislators or presidents, to peaceful demonstrations, to violent insurrections or revolutions). The teacher will introduce the concept of civil disobedience and discuss examples from history (e.g. Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Tiananmen Square), which can be used as comparisons and contrasts to the events that would unfold in Leipzig in the fall of 1989.

The teacher should review the events that led to the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe — Gorbachev’s policies in the Soviet Union (*glasnost*, *perestroika*, *Demokratizatsiya* journal), *Solidarity* in Poland, and the opening of the Austro-Hungarian border.

Students will view the Peaceful Revolution PowerPoint (**PowerPoint 4.2.1 on Instructional Resource Disc**) on the background of both the prayer-for-peace services convened in Leipzig’s St. Nicholas Church in 1983 and the different aspects of the Peaceful Revolution of 1989.

The teacher should distribute the Interviews with Irmtraud Hollitzer and Tobias Hollitzer (**Handout 4.2.2 on Instructional Resource Disc**) and facilitate a discussion of their lives in Leipzig, in the GDR, and their participation in the Peaceful Revolution of October 9, 1989.

The teacher will then distribute the Peaceful Revolution Document-Based Question (**Handout 4.2.3 on Instructional Resource Disc**) and direct the students to read the documents critically and to take notes in preparation for the written essay. The students should observe that the documents have different viewpoints. These documents reflect the observations of people who participated at and commented on the Leipzig demonstrations in the fall of 1989.

As a homework assignment, the students should read and take notes on the DBQ (**Handout 4.2.3 on Instructional Resource Disc**) for the essay, which they will write in class the following day. [Variation: the students work in pairs to read and analyze the documents in class.]

DAY 3:

- *Option 1:* Having read the documents for homework the previous night, the students will respond to the DBQ in an essay discussing the observations of the participants and commentators of the Leipzig demonstrations in the fall of 1989 as an example of civil disobedience. They should be allowed to use their notes.
- *Option 2:* The students spend the period preparing the essay. They might use a graphic organizer to categorize the documents that reflect different perspectives. The teacher has the opportunity to monitor the students’ preparation and also field any questions they might have. If the teacher chooses this option, the students should write their essays at home to be submitted the following day.

WHOLE GROUP REFLECTION:

- The students should discuss the ways civil disobedience has been used throughout history to effect change. They should be able to comment on the influence Leipzig’s Peaceful Revolution of 1989 had on the collapse of the German Democratic Republic. The students should be able to assess the different viewpoints of the participants and observers of the Leipzig demonstration. Finally, the teacher may ask the students to compare the response of the East German police to that of the Chinese police in response to the Tiananmen Square demonstration earlier in 1989.

MODIFICATIONS:

- If the students are not familiar with the techniques of document analysis for writing a document-based essay, the teacher may want to conduct a general discussion on each of the documents before the students begin writing.
- As an alternative, this could become a group activity: the teacher could assign different documents to separate groups for analysis and full class discussion.
- For students who have weaker analytical skills, the teacher could help strengthen their skills by offering a few “scaffold questions” to assist students in their document analysis.

EXTENSIONS:

- The teacher should encourage students to visit the website of the *Stasi* Museum in Leipzig: *Museum in der “Runden Ecke”* <http://www.runde-ecke-leipzig.de>.



- The events in Leipzig are just one of many that occurred in late summer and fall of 1989 in Germany and Eastern Europe. *Making the History of 1989* is an excellent online resource for teachers and students detailing the collapse of Communist regimes in 1989 <http://chnm.gmu.edu/1989/>.

- For further research, students should read the Teacher Background Information Articles included on the 4.2 Teacher Background Information (**Handout 4.2.4 on Instructional Resource Disc**)

Sources:

This lesson has been adapted from lessons by TOP Fellows Barbara Hairfield (2005) and Sigrid Ann Olsen (2007).

Schememann, S. (1989, December 19). Upheaval in the East; Leipzig Marchers Tiptoe Around Reunification. *New York Times*. Retrieved from:

<http://www.nytimes.com/1989/12/19/world/upheaval-in-the-east-leipzig-marchers-tiptoe-around-reunification>.