

Historians Turned Eyewitnesses

Two Berlin Program alumni look back at the wall-shattering events of 1989



On the left: Hope M. Harrison, November 11, 1989 · On the right: Susan A. Crane, June 2019 at the Wall Memorial on Bernauer Straße

November 2019, Wittenbergplatz: The KaDeWe, Berlin's famous luxury department store, currently features photos of their employees who tell us where they were on the night of November 9, 1989. Literally everyone in Berlin remembers where they were and what they did. Among them, **Hope M. Harrison** and **Susan A. Crane**, two young historians who were in Berlin for their dissertation research. To historians, it must have been noteworthy, and perhaps ironic, that the events they witnessed were in part set in motion by a double misunderstanding.

November 9, 1989, 18:57: Press Conference of the Central Committee of the SED: Günter Schabowski prematurely announced the easing of travel restrictions going into effect "immediately and without delay." West German television broke the news by declaring the Wall to be open. Tens of thousands of East Germans made their way to the checkpoints and crossed into the West.

Hope M. Harrison, now Associate Professor of History and International Affairs at the George Washington University (Berlin Program fellows 1991/1992), and Susan A. Crane, now Associate Professor of Modern European History at the University of Arizona (Berlin Program fellow 1989/90), witnessed history in the making. For the 30th anniversary of the fall of what the GDR government called *Anti-Fascist Protection Rampart* (Antifaschistischer Schutzwall) they share their recollections and reflections with us.

HOPE M. HARRISON

November 1989 in Berlin

On November 9, 1989, I boarded a plane in New York City at Kennedy airport for a long-planned trip to West Berlin, having no idea (as no one did at the time) that the Berlin Wall would fall while I was on the plane.

I was a graduate student at Columbia University writing my dissertation on the Berlin Wall, and in 1989, I was also a pre-doctoral fellow at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. Each year the city of West Berlin paid for a group of American "young leaders," drawn from Harvard and Stanford, to spend ten days in the city. The goal of the program was to have us get to know West Berlin and presumably to convince us of the importance of protecting democratic West Berlin from any pressure the communist regimes in East Berlin or Moscow might exert in the future.

In the previous few months, thousands of East Germans had escaped to West Germany via the newly opened border between Hungary and Austria or via East-West German negotiated agreements for the release to West Germany of refugees camped out at their embassies in Warsaw and Prague and their Permanent Mission in East Berlin. Given that the West German government provided each East German citizen with 100 DM of "welcome money" and help finding housing and a job as well as granting them citizenship, the West German system was overwhelmed. The questions I had prepared for the West Berlin officials we would meet all revolved around this situation and how long the city could handle the mass influx of refugees.

Since no direct flights were allowed to West Berlin from outside of West Germany during the Cold War, I had to go through Frankfurt. After landing there in the early morning hours of November 10 and boarding the flight for the short trip to West Berlin, I looked around and saw everyone reading newspapers with banner headlines that said, "Die Mauer ist offen!" "The Wall is open!" I wondered, "Is my German not as good as I think it is? What is going on?"

SUSAN A. CRANE

Die Wende 30 Years Later: Memories Without Souvenirs

I arrived in Berlin in September 1989 to begin a year of doctoral dissertation research. When I left the States, the joke was, "don't forget your camera!" because everyone had been following events in central Europe. We all thought that "something" big, possibly very bad, might happen; we feared Soviet crackdown on the East German protests, Prague Spring all over again. But when something big really did happen on November 9, I still didn't have my camera with me. I was at home reading. I got up the next morning and went to the Staatsbibliothek like I had done every day: without a camera. And on the KuDamm bus I wondered, why is there a line outside the bank?

It was my incredible good fortune to be in Berlin that year thanks to my Berlin Program Fellowship. I was a visitor in a land that underwent a profound change, a newcomer who already had a crush on West Berlin. Being in that island of a city in the midst of inaccessible East Germany felt exotic and laden with historical significance. I had just moved into an apartment near KaDeWe, where I'd had the incredible luck of finding a sublet in a town notoriously short of affordable housing. I'd visited Berlin only once before, briefly, but long enough to realize that the historic parts I'd read about, the museums I intended to study, were all on the other side of the Wall.

Please bear my youth and recent arrival in mind as you read the following, transcribed from tightly written lines on air mail paper. I hadn't slept, and yet I wanted to share the enormous experience with my family. I'm grateful to my mom, who loved history and never threw out a single letter I wrote. I was no expert on German politics, just a student who had an extraordinary opportunity to learn more than I ever bargained for. I can cringe now over some of my youthful observations, and still share it as an authentic document of one observer's experiences during *Die Wende*.



*Lehrter Bahnhof, November 10, 1989 (Suzanne Marchand in foreground).
Photo by Susan Crane*

Or is November 10 the equivalent of April Fool's Day in Germany?" I didn't have to wonder for long.

The pilot got on the intercom and announced, "Ladies and gentlemen. In case you haven't heard, the Berlin Wall fell last night, and we are flying into history!" Everyone burst into applause as I sat there stunned and then very excited about this incredible turn of events and my lucky timing.

Over the next ten days, I visited the Berlin Wall several times around the Brandenburg Gate and Potsdamer Platz, picking up some of my own small pieces. I watched one evening as a bulldozer removed a section of the Wall at Potsdamer Platz to allow East Germans to come through driving their pollution-emitting Trabants or walking. I watched as West Germans showered East Germans with hugs, flowers, money, or Sekt (sparkling wine). Everyone was cheering and/or crying tears of joy. People were selling Sekt on what felt like every street corner. And huge A&P trucks were camped out at some of the crossing points in the Wall giving the East Germans free bananas (not generally available in East Germany) and good coffee (also not easy to come by in the East).

The first night our group was in West Berlin, we all went to the big rally at John F. Kennedy Platz outside

Nov. 10, 1989 (THE Day!)

Dear Mom and Dad,
I can't believe what I'm seeing, hearing, all that's happened—open borders between East and West! The city is electrified—people in the streets, the other end of my street looks like a 5th Avenue tickertape parade without the mess: Everyone is out, everyone is cheering, excited, alert. Kohl and Momper (West Berlin mayor) just gave speeches a few blocks away, which I caught on TV; both spoke of Germany leading the way for Europe, couching everything in terms of whole Europe, Poland and Hungary included. Kohl also got a big hand for emphasizing how the German people could not have come to this historic day with-

out the continued support (read: military *Sicherung*) of the Allies. Or, read another way, no cold war, no revolution—revolution?! Sue and I kept calling it that today. We met in the library and realized we were both too stirred up and excited to stay and read, especially being so close to the Wall, so we joined the crowd flocking to Checkpoint Charlie.

People were lining the streets, loudly cheering each car that came through. And people came, and came! Thousands of DDR-Bürger came over for a look, some for the first time. I saw huge lines at the banks—1st goal of the East Germans is the *Begrüßungsgeld*, along with picking up a city map. The TV news this evening is showing even greater crowds and throngs than I saw, and something even more astonishing: young people ON the Wall itself! There's a huge party in progress at the Brandenburg Gate, where hundreds of people have clambered up onto the Wall, some even coming down into the border-zone between the West and East walls, even talking to the DDR-police. Emotions are high—tears, smiles, disbelief are rampant. Also goodwill—a German friend from volleyball said she bought lunch for an East Berlin woman and made a new friend. The news is full of people volunteering clothes, food, shelter, even jobs.

It's been 28 years, and today the Wall is just an aspect of the landscape.

West Berlin's city hall, Rathaus Schöneberg, where West German chancellor Helmut Kohl, Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher, and former West German Chancellor and West Berlin Mayor Willy Brandt all addressed the crowds. I was stunned when people booed Kohl. I was later told that he was not popular in West Berlin, since he was much more conservative than most West Berliners. It was at this rally that Brandt made his now-famous statement, "Es wächst zusammen, was zusammen gehört." ("What belongs together is now growing together.")

Back at dinner afterwards at the Hotel Alpenland (which, alas, doesn't exist anymore) near Savignyplatz, our hosts had invited some guests to join us. One of them, Claudia Wilhelm, was a high school English teacher and had lived in Berlin her whole life, first in the East, then in the West. Her family had moved from East to West Berlin in the late 1950s before the Wall was built in 1961. We got to talking and she asked whether I would like to join her the following day for a drive around the city to see places where the Wall was opening. Again, I could not believe my good fortune! Being shown around the city by a Berliner at this extraordinary moment in time? Yes, I wanted to join her!

One of the places we visited was the Glienicker Brücke, the famous bridge where the US and Soviet Union swapped spies at the border in the middle

According to the screaming headline of the *BZ* (the equivalent of the *NY Post*): "The Wall is gone! Berlin is again Berlin!" But the rest of the papers didn't go for sensation, the open borders are just the latest development in a huge trend toward either reunification or TWO totally new countries—there's no way the BRD can remain unchanged as well.

And of the thousands coming over, the vast majority are going BACK. The American papers (*Herald Tribune*) were full of dire predictions of a million people fleeing the DDR this year; at least today, we don't see it.

It's impossible to dampen the day's spirits, but there are a few opinions for the other side. For example, the fears that the BRD will be flooded, overcrowded; that the concern for East Germans already is demonstrating the feared German nationalism—there've been reports that East Germans are complaining about being given emergency shelter with "foreigners" such as Poles, Turks, etc.

But tonight, it's a big celebration of a kind of reunification, with theaters offering ½ price tickets to East Germans and bars offering 1:1 exchange rates. The police men are carrying cameras along with everyone else. There are no parking places anywhere near the KuDamm. Karin (volleyball friend) is coming over and we're going to check out the Brandenburg Gate. What a day! More later...



Cross section of the Wall, Potsdamer Platz, Dec. 31, 1989. Photo by Susan Crane

<Nov. 11> I'm so overwhelmed by the emotional and psychological stress and overload of all this! Last night Karin, Sue, and I made our way through the crowds at Potsdamer Platz and watched people chipping away at the Wall—I was standing next to people hammering at the Berlin Wall!! I still can't quite believe it. We walked to the Brandenburg Gate and saw hundreds of kids who'd climbed up on the Wall and were popping champagne corks, lighting candles, and singing songs like "Yellow Submarine" and "We Shall Overcome" and "All You Need is Love" and "How many roads..."

of the bridge which connected the southwest corner of West Berlin with the neighboring East German city of Potsdam. (The bridge was brought to life again in 2015 with the film *Bridge of Spies*, filmed on location.) Claudia and I stood on the West Berlin side of the bridge soaking up the jubilant atmosphere and watching streams of East Germans coming across, while the water of the Havel River sparkled below and the early 19th-century Schloss Glienicke, overlooking the bridge, experienced another profound moment in German history.

One evening I tried take the S-Bahn from West Berlin to East Berlin. Not a chance! There were thousands and thousands of East Germans streaming out of every station into West Berlin. So instead I did what they did—headed to the KuDamm, the 5th Avenue of West Berlin. With so few interesting or good quality consumer goods in the East, East Germans wanted to see the stores on the KuDamm. In fact, so many of them headed there that weekend of November 11-12 when more than 2 million East Germans flooded into West Berlin that they had to close the street to cars. East Germans walked up



Potsdamer Platz, November 1989. Photo of her family by Liselotte Orgel-Köhne, gift to Susan Crane

(Bob Dylan!)—in the spirit of resistance if not necessarily appropriate to the occasion. This is a revolution without a script—everyone seems to be waiting for someone to give them their lines. The mood continues to be joyful—it’s one big boozy party, cases of beer and champagne everywhere but no fights, no danger, everyone a comrade. Karin climbed up on the Wall and came down elated by what she’d done. Today, however, the East German guards have driven away the Wall-squatters and are themselves atop the Wall.

[As fellow historian Sue Marchand, Karin Geck, and I arrived at the Wall near Potsdamer Platz, we were handed special editions of the *Tagesspiegel*, which proclaimed “Night of the Open Borders” and featured an iconic photo of citizens atop the Wall as well as a photo that shows what we saw at Checkpoint Charlie. It’s now framed above my office desk. I didn’t climb up on the Wall, although I helped Karin up, and I don’t have a piece of it as a souvenir. I had a strong sense that I was an outside observer, and that it was more appropriate to let Germans climb up or chip away as they expressed their joy.]

Still, the party continues, as it did through the night. I didn’t get home until 2 a.m., having waited ½ hour for my second U-Bahn. Ingrid came at 4 a.m., having left Nuremberg at 10 p.m. and driven straight here—she called earlier to warn me, said she was too overwrought and couldn’t stay away any longer. She’s at the Gate now. I went out this morning for my Saturday ritual of vegetable-market shopping and was amazed all over again at the sheer hordes of people. Couldn’t get into the grocery stores or post office, the lines were so long, made this place look like East Berlin! But as ever, the queues were polite and patient, no pushing. The outdoor market, further from the KuDamm, was more like normal. Traffic everywhere was at a standstill, all the little rattle-trap Trabis loaded with people staring out the windows, hunting for parking places, emitted more noxious pollution than LA experiences in a 1st stage smog alert, disgusting to breathe. All the shops and banks are open special hours today, and tomorrow as well! And for them to be open on a Sunday is, as Sue noted, the true sign of a revolution.



Trabis waiting at the border crossing at Invalidenstraße to go back to East Berlin, Nov. 10, 1989. Photo by Susan Crane

and down the gorgeous wide, tree-lined street and also headed to the most famous department store nearby, KaDeWe, and especially to its 6th floor, packed with restaurants and food stalls selling food and drink from all over the world (champagne and fresh French pastries flown in daily from Paris, etc.) and including more than 200 types of German sausage (or Wurst).

Another evening I did get to East Berlin along with one of the Harvard students on the trip with me. He had contacts in East Berlin and we joined them at one of the large demonstrations that had been taking place for more than two months against the East German regime. I was a little nervous, since I had never been to a demonstration in the US, to saying nothing of one against a communist regime. But my new friend assured me we would be fine and that the East German authorities had given up using force against demonstrators, particularly since the mood had changed so dramatically with the fall of the Wall. So we went.

The demonstration was held in Bebelplatz, along the main street of East Berlin, Unter den Linden, with Humboldt University and the Staatsoper (State Opera House) surrounding it. Bebelplatz was where the Nazis had burned 20,000 books they disapproved of in 1933. And now East Germans

This afternoon Sue and I braved the S-Bahn to go to one of the other crossing points. The only other time I've been in such a crush was Guy Fawkes night in Lewes, when I was at Sussex—the air squeezed out of me by all the people who could possibly fit and the doors still closed. When we got out at Lehrter Bahnhof the view was impressive: From the train platform we looked down on a long line of Trabis and a throng a block long, all people waiting to get BACK, to the East. Again, I was amazed at their patience and cheerfulness. It must have taken hours to go through, and more people were being re-routed from the Friedrichstraße S-Bahnhof, which was so overflowing they had to close it temporarily. We

walked to the border and saw the usual crowd of West Germans lining the entry route and cheering each Trabi that came through. I climbed up and got a good view of the long line in the East waiting to come over. Three white swans flew over and delighted the crowd by landing on the other side of the bridge.

We came back through Zoo Station and the KuDamm, which were an amazing sight: teeming with people as far as you could see, and everyone just walking and talking and looking. Baby strollers everywhere, kids on parents' shoulders; I can imagine the parents thinking, when they're old enough I'll tell them they were in Berlin the day the Wall came down—as it has. It may remain standing as a memorial, but in effect it is down.

Usually those kinds of crowds make me nervous and wear me out, but today I wasn't worried. The mood is too celebratory, too full of good will to men, like an ideal Christmas. But I am tired and worn out by it all. I don't think I'll go out again today. Another meeting of some kind is on for tomorrow at the Gedächtniskirche. I was supposed to be having the Orgel-Köhnes and Sue over for coffee but we cancelled—life is NOT normal this weekend! Karin, Sue, and I never did go to the movies, which was our original plan. How often do you get a chance to “live history” this way?!

were demonstrating their own disapproval with the state of affairs and calling for free elections, freedom of assembly, and the end of the dreaded Stasi, the secret police. We were packed in with thousands of people in the square, but it was peaceful and there was a feeling of excitement among the demonstrators.

Over the ten days I spent in Berlin, I kept wondering (as did everyone): what will happen next? It wasn't at all clear in those early days that unification would automatically follow the fall of the Wall. That path developed in the months ahead. I also kept thinking how glad I was that a few months earlier when I was studying German in Boppard-am-Rhein, I decided to rent a car and drive up to Berlin for my first-ever visit to the divided city and the Wall. I spent three fascinating days there in July, even driving through Checkpoint Charlie and going up in the Fernsehturm (the TV tower) where the lunch consisted of some sort of mystery meat (best not to know!) but the view of the city was amazing. I was glad that I had had one experience with Berlin while the Wall stood, because now it was coming down!

As I shared in the jubilation of the Berliners about the fall of the Wall, I also kept wondering: will anyone care now about the dissertation I am writing about the erection of the Wall?! I didn't imagine then that Germany would unite less than a year later,

But normal life does go on—that's part of what makes events like opening the borders all that much more amazing. I can be in Berlin and see the response and even join the crowd, but I am not creating history—historical events happen AROUND the people they affect. I had a strong sense today that this is how people survive wars, this is how societies persist despite wars: There is the continuity of everyday life and the vast number of people for whom "history" is a condition, a state of being, and not a personal creation—only a personal experience.

<Nov. 12> This is becoming more of a journal than a letter! Half a million people did indeed come to Berlin yesterday. At 8 a.m. the mayors of the two Berlins met at the new crossing point carved out of the wall at Potsdamer Platz—an extremely significant location, full of meaning for the Germans, it was once the busiest thoroughfare in Germany, but now it's a deserted field behind the Staatsbibliothek. I haven't been out yet to check on the crowds—frankly, I'm dreading it a little. Normal life has been suspended, any plans I had to meet friends have been cancelled. Yes, I'm tired. Overstimulated. How much newness and change can you take? (A lot!)

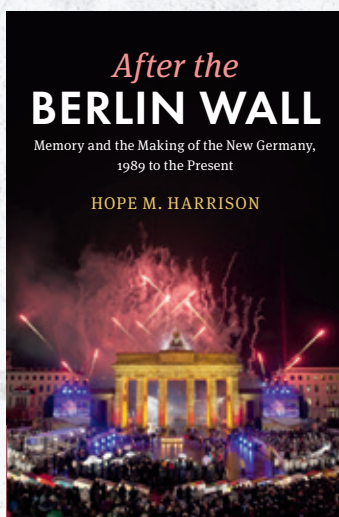
<LATER> I did go out after all, but on my own. I had an errand to run that took me out towards the Olympic Stadium. It was very cold out but clear so I walked around a bit, looking at the massive architecture—big and blocky. The people on the U-Bahn were all excited and talking to each other about the border. LOTS of DDR-Bürger around—I've learned to spot them by their new maps, plastic shoes, polyester clothes. They've bought the city out of chocolate! I came back to the KuDamm and found the crowds again. Also watched a protest march by the Autonomen, the ultra-left anarchist group. They look like old-style English punks and were mostly guys under 25. Their catchy slogan: "Kein Kohl, kein Krenz, kein Daimler Benz!" They also carried banners suggesting that ALL foreigners, not just East Germans, ought to receive the *Begrüßungsgeld* and that neither



Autonomen protest march, KuDamm, Nov. 12, 1989. Photo by Susan Crane

the Soviet Union would collapse two years later, and the archives in Moscow, Berlin and other soon-to-be former communist countries would open for historians like myself. But that's what happened! And thanks to a pre-doctoral Berlin Program fellowship I had in 1991-92 from the Social Science Research Council/Free University Berlin, I ended up being one of the first historians to use the archives in Berlin and Moscow to tell the story of the decision to build the Berlin Wall--first in my dissertation at Columbia and then in my book, *Driving the Soviets up the Wall: Soviet-East German Relations, 1953-1961* (Princeton University Press, 2003 and published in German as *Ulbrichts Mauer: Wie die SED Moskaus Widerstand gegen den Mauerbau brachte* with Propyläen, 2011).

My experience in Berlin in November 1989 also laid the seeds for the book I have just published about how the Germans have grappled with the history and legacy of the Berlin Wall over the past thirty years since its fall: *After the Berlin Wall: Memory and the Making of the New Germany, 1989 to the Present* (Cambridge University Press, October 2019). And Claudia, the English teacher I met the first night in West Berlin who showed me around? We have stayed friends ever since, and I will be staying with her as usual when I return to Berlin to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Wall.



Cambridge
University Press
September 2019
ISBN: 978-1107049314

East nor West has dealt with the Third World properly. They too were orderly, escorted in front and back by police as usual—but nobody cheered them. Still, that's democracy in action, letting the opposition raise its voice—I wonder what the DDR tourists made of it.

I was only out for a few hours—my toes and hands were frozen!—before coming back. Not such a bad day. This radical state of things is almost beginning to feel normal. Even the KuDamm wasn't so crowded—"so" being a relative term as in, instead of 500,000 people there were "only" 300-400,000! I've collected the local papers for the past few days, and shot a roll of film, to create my own little archive. Sue and I sent a letter and a copy of the paper to Michael Geyer, to the effect of saying, "well, we tried to work in the library but, gee, we got a little distracted!" West Germans like Geyer seem to be even more excited about all this than the native Berliners, though still not as much as the East Germans. For the Berliners, the Wall is a familiar, normal aspect of daily life; for everyone else it's a huge, strange symbol of political oppression. But East and West Germans are discussing it constantly, in the streets, markets, U-Bahns. There's a strong sympathy that seems to come with the language.

It's going to take time to sort out all the complex emotions and reactions from this weekend, but you got the first impressions and reports as they came! I'll battle my way into the post office tomorrow and get this off to you. Hope you are well—thinking of you with love,
Susan