

Through Prague to Freedom: The Exodus of GDR Citizens through Czechoslovakia to the Federal Republic of Germany, September 30 – November 10, 1989

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At no time since the Second World War had such key events in German history taken place so directly on Czechoslovak soil as in the twelve weeks of the late summer and autumn of 1989, when an exodus of citizens of the German Democratic Republic, in three waves, traveled through the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic to reach the Federal Republic of Germany. And never, except for the Soviet-led military intervention in Czechoslovakia in August 1968, had Prague and its Lesser Town (Malá Strana) quarter – particularly the streets Tržiště, Vlašská, and Karmelitská – drawn so much attention from the world communications media and public.

In the summer of 1989 no one had yet guessed that this would be the year of miracles, the definitive end of the Cold War, the year of democratic revolutions in the outer empire of the Soviet Union. True, there had been major changes in Poland and Hungary, a removal of the barriers on the Hungarian side of the border with Austria, and a clear statement from Moscow that the Brezhnev Doctrine, which limited the sovereignty of the individual Warsaw Pact countries, was a thing of the past. There were all sorts of indications that a breaking point was about to be reached. Yet no one, not even the intelligence agencies in the West, was able to predict that this would be the final crisis of the Communist system in Europe.

Two regimes – the Czechoslovak and the East German – had set themselves against the spirit of the times, and strove to resist the external factors pressing them to open up to democratization. This made them closer allies than ever before. The factors undermining the political stability of the GDR were numerous. The most obvious was the existence of another German state, one that was democratic and prospering; for decades, many GDR citizens had dreamt of getting into the Federal Republic. After August 13, 1961, the chance to flee the GDR by simply walking into West Berlin was closed off; henceforth the only way out was a risky defection. Later, after the so-called normalization of relations between the GDR and the Federal Republic, a complicated and thorny application procedure for permits for “long-term exit” to the Federal Republic was put into place. There was ransom for some East German political prisoners, and other ways of getting to the Federal Republic for citizens of the GDR who could not live there, or no longer wanted to.

In the summer of 1989 the world was witnessing events similar to things that had gone on in previous years, but sporadically, randomly, and rarely affecting more than a few hundred people. Now it became a mass phenomenon. First thousands and then tens of thousands of GDR citizens (predominantly young people and members of some professional groups), fed up with conditions at home and the hopelessness of life in the German Democratic Republic, decided to try and reach the West German territory. Some of them sought a way out by taking refuge at the West German embassies in Berlin and Warsaw, while most took advantage of the chance to travel to Hungary without a passport or visa, and then to Czechoslovakia. The Hungarian road forms an independent chapter of this story, thanks mainly to the willingness of the Hungarian authorities to open the doors to the exodus through the border with Austria, and to come to an agreement with the West German government on how to handle the problem regardless of existing agreements and treaties with the GDR.

In mid-August 1989 the West German embassy in Prague became the second most important refuge for East Germans trying to get into the Federal Republic. After August 20, so many of them were crammed into the West German embassy in the Lobkowitz Palais, in the Lesser Town, Prague, that the West German foreign ministry saw no choice but to close the embassy to public business. At that time the number of East German refugees taking shelter there was barely a tenth of the number it would be necessary to house and feed five weeks later, by the end of September 1989. The East German exodus through Czechoslovakia took place in three waves. The first was negotiated by Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher, and again three or four days later, on October 3 and 4, through East Germany. The final exodus began on November 3, this time directly from Czechoslovakia to the Federal Republic of Germany, without any bureaucratic obstruction.

The first and second waves from Prague

The first wave of six thousand people moved from Prague to West Germany through East German territory. The arrangements took some time to set up, but after the means of travel were decided upon things moved quickly, beginning on the evening of September 30 and ending by the morning of October 1. The first bus with “refugees from the GDR” left the embassy building in the Lesser Town at 19:30, and the first train departed from Praha-Libeň station at 21:30 on September 30. The final bus to the station left the embassy on October 1 at 8:00, and the last of six special trains from Prague reached the border town of Hof, West Germany, on October 1 at 18:00.

The second exodus from Prague to the Federal Republic, consisting of 8,270 people, also traveled through GDR territory, aboard eight special trains leaving from Praha-Libeň station at short intervals between 18:24 on October 4 and 01:35 on October 5. Their passage through the German Democratic Republic was not nearly as quick and uneventful as the previous wave, particularly because of a conflict between police and demonstrators at the Dresden station, and because of obstacles on the designated route, which caused several trains to be diverted.

A half-open door

As of 17:00 on October 3, citizens of the GDR were no longer allowed free entry into the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic (as they had been for the past several years) with only their identification cards rather than passports or visas. Consequently, the inflow of refugees into the grounds of the West German embassy in Prague was not as great as it had been in September and the first days of October. Nevertheless, it remained such a serious problem for all the parties involved that the East German political leadership was under great pressure to come up with a new solution.

The taboo had been broken, now for the second in a row; the only question remaining was under what conditions and by what route citizens of the GDR would leave for the Federal Republic. The West German government issued a statement to the Czechoslovak government on October 18, proposing a new procedure: direct departure by all available means of transport from Czechoslovakia to West Germany without passing through the GDR. The formalities would be handled at the East German embassy in Prague; applicants would relinquish their GDR citizenship and be given an identification document to show to the Czechoslovak border guards. This measure was limited in a number of respects, however, and did not apply to everyone who had taken refuge at the West German embassy.

On October 19, Ambassador Helmut Ziebart of the GDR was informed of the Czechoslovak government's agreement with this procedure. The West Germany embassy in Prague was not informed until October 25, but soon took action. On the afternoon of that same day, forms for release from citizenship were being filled out and the applications were handed over to the GDR embassy for processing. The first departure under these rules was to be by rented bus on October 27. The wheels of bureaucracy turned slowly: the East German embassy was incapable of handling more than a hundred cases a day.

In the meantime the East German politburo and its new general secretary, Egon Krenz, resolved on October 24, undoubtedly in the spirit of the *Wende* ("turnaround") policy

announced by Krenz on the day of his election, to abolish the temporary ban on free travel to Czechoslovakia as of November 1; the policy would be announced on October 28. The Czechoslovak ambassador in Berlin, František Langer, relayed this information “from confidential sources” to Prague on the day after the decision, and passed along the opinion of the German side that any possible new refugees should no longer be a problem for the Czechoslovaks.

The third wave: breakdown

But things turned out quite the other way round. On the afternoon of November 3, the ministry of foreign affairs conveyed to Ambassador Ziebart an alarming message from the Czechoslovak Communist Party General Secretary Miloš Jakeš to his Berlin counterpart Krenz about a rapid increase in the number of GDR citizens at the West German embassy and of the need to speed up the processing of “affected citizens” to allow them to leave as soon as possible. Of the three options offered by Jakeš, only two could solve the situation – namely, either to close the borders of Czechoslovakia again to travel from East Germany or “to suspend the unpublished part of the treaty on mutual tourism with the GDR, which would require the return of citizens who attempted illegally to cross the border into a third country.” In non-diplomatic language that meant letting the Czechoslovak authorities allow East Germans to pass freely into the Federal Republic.

The GDR’s foreign minister, Oskar Fischer, relayed Jakeš’s message to Krenz, including the suggestion that they agree to the direct departure of GDR citizens from Czechoslovakia to the Federal Republic without formal release from GDR citizenship. The same day, on the evening of November 3, the politburo of the central committee of the East German Communist party (the SED) gave its approval for this arrangement.

The West German embassy in Prague then worked out the details with the East German embassy, and the rest was merely a matter of the logistical capabilities of the West German and Czechoslovak railroads. The first train left Prague on November 4 at 9:22, the sixth at 18:20. On these first six trains, 6,453 East Germans traveled from Prague to West Germany; another five to eight hundred of them made the trip in their own automobiles.

This was of course just the beginning of the third wave of the exodus, which grew in strength each day until the moment when the news went around that the Berlin Wall was down and that the crossings along the whole border between the two Germanys had been opened for free movement. According to the findings of the Czechoslovak Interior Ministry,

between 4 November 1989 and 12:00 of November 10 some 62,500 East German citizens had traveled from Czechoslovakia to West Germany.

Prague ultimatums?

In the context of the November 7–9 decision of the Berlin politburo, German historians speak of an ultimatum by Prague that played a role in forcing a decision on the new regulations on travel by East German citizens to the West. It thus contributed to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the opening of the East German borders much sooner, and in a different manner, than had been intended.

The Czechoslovak side – the high officials of the Party, the Foreign Ministry, ambassadors, and the Party’s propaganda apparatus – had been a loyal ally of the GDR as both were taking a harder line in the summer of 1989 in the face of the dizzying changes in Poland and Hungary, and the fact that Moscow was letting these developments run their course. In rejecting requests and suggestions from West German officials, Czechoslovak politicians and diplomats had for weeks behaved as uncooperatively and uncompromisingly as their East German counterparts. In the second half of September, however, the attitude of Prague began to change, though this was carefully hidden from the public eye and from West German negotiators.

On September 21, a Czechoslovak foreign ministry official, Milan Kadnár, was sent to Berlin as a messenger from General Secretary Jakeš and the Czechoslovak government. He met with the GDR foreign minister, Fischer, and expounded at length and eloquently on the unlimited support and solidarity felt by Czechoslovak officials for the attitudes and positions of the GDR. This prepared the ground for the heart of the message, which was “to raise the polite question and request” whether the GDR would consider resolving the “Prague problem” by means of a one-time action such as in 1984, when a three-month “occupation” of the Prague embassy of the Federal Republic by GDR citizens was settled by allowing them to move to the Federal Republic after first returning to the GDR. Kadnár explained to the East Germans the manifold dangers and risks the situation in Prague entailed, and how they might be taken advantage of and misused by the “enemy.” He assured them that if they went along with what would be declared a “major exception” the Czechoslovak side would place an “impermeable guard on the FRG embassy and erect a steel fence around it.”

Less than two weeks had passed before there was a request from Prague to repeat the “one-time” action of September 30, as a further humanitarian measure after the promised efforts had failed to ensure that new “refugees” would not get through the “impermeable

guard” into the West German embassy. Now the situation was even more threatening than it had been on September 29. The blizzard of urgent messages sent directly from Prague and through the Czechoslovak embassy in Berlin on October 3 and 4 give a hint of the kind of nervousness, even panic that was caused in the Czechoslovak Communist Party leadership, the government, and the foreign ministry by the mere news that the beginning of the agreed-to wave of transports would be delayed by twenty-four hours. It is hard to say whether all the arguments telephoned and telegraphed to Berlin about what threatened to happen in Prague – including possible demonstrations by GDR citizens, “which could be joined by Prague intellectuals, dissidents, and young people”, actions “on the Beijing model” – reflected real fears or were simply meant to put pressure on their East German partners. Meanwhile the Czechoslovak Communist Party leadership decided to send a summary to Party officials right down to the district level “on the problem of the presence of GDR citizens at the FRG embassy in Prague.”

Outwardly, of course, the Czechoslovak government and foreign ministry broadcast their solidarity with the stance of the GDR. On October 3, the foreign ministry sent a note of protest to the West German embassy complaining of “illegal actions,” and in its statement of that day the re-opening of the embassy to GDR citizens was called irresponsible. Nevertheless, the demarches and urgent messages that the East German ambassador, Ziebart, was soon subjected to by Czechoslovak officials contained the first hints that if transports were not begun by train and bus, the ČSSR would have to consider “its own solution;” this was allegedly declared at a meeting at Czechoslovak Premier Ladislav Adamec’s, in the early morning of October 4.

The situation repeated itself, but much more seriously, by November 3. This time Krenz and the SED politburo responded to Jakeš’s pleas much quicker than Erich Honecker had a month earlier. The SED leadership had its hands full trying to deal with the growing demonstrations, the opposition activity, and the Party’s increasingly obvious loss of authority in society. It therefore evidently suited the SED leadership that the problem of people trying to exercise their right to go to the Federal Republic was settled by a detour through Czechoslovakia, without the SED having to take immediate measures. They may have even imagined that this would ease political tensions in the country.

Prague hastens the fall of the Berlin Wall

By this time, however, Prague had run out of patience, and self-interest had become a greater priority for Czechoslovak officials than the interests of their closest ally. And so, on

November 8, Ambassador Ziebart was asked by Pavel Sadovský, Czechoslovak First Deputy Foreign Minister, to pass along to Berlin a “plea” from the Czechoslovak Government and the department of international politics at the Czechoslovak Communist Party Central Committee “that departures by GDR citizens for the FRG be handled directly, and not through the territory of the ČSSR”. Czechoslovak ambassador Langer was one of those delegated to transmit this request in Berlin. This pressure from Prague, a kind of ultimatum, as it is described by German historians, was regarded by the East German politburo and leading officials of the state security ministry as a factor that influenced their decision-making. This comports with the language of documents in which a speeded-up “modification of rules for permanent exit” was blamed on the complications caused in Czechoslovakia by current practice. Krenz talked about the need to settle the “problem of exits” at a meeting of the SED Central Committee on November 9: “The Czechoslovak comrades are starting to be bothered by this, just as the Hungarians were before.” Krenz’s comment, “Whatever we do will be wrong,” precisely captures the SED leadership’s situation: there was no good alternative available. The erstwhile allies, East Germany and Czechoslovakia, were now separated; and both were isolated internationally. A visit by Krenz to Prague, planned for November 17, was called off at the last minute. It was a symbolic end to the story.