

9 November 1989: The Border Opens

East Berliners climb up onto the Berlin Wall on the night of 9–10 November 1989.



ON THURSDAY 9 NOVEMBER 1989, the press conference described at the beginning of this book took place. The government's vital detail that travellers would need to obtain visas was lost in the excitement of the main news – East Germans were to be allowed to cross the border. Journalists ran from the room, most to the nearest telephone. Within the hour, East German television was broadcasting the news that the barriers along the Berlin Wall were opening. The switchboards were jammed by East Berliners unable to believe what they were hearing. When West German television also started to broadcast the news, people stepped out into the frosty Berlin night to see if it was true. At the wall itself, no one had given the East German guards new orders. They stayed at their posts as the crowds gathered at the wall's crossing-points.

9.00 pm A few people approached the guards at the crossing-point on Invaliden Strasse. The guards told them they would need to obtain passports and visas before they could cross.

9.30 pm A middle-aged husband and wife went to the Bornholmer Strasse crossing and asked to be allowed through. The guard there had heard the news on his radio. He let them through but made them promise to come back to East Berlin later on! The crowd of East Berliners that had gathered behind them recovered from their amazement and approached the guard. He waved them all through.

10.30 pm Programmes on West German television were interrupted as news crews arrived at the crossing-points. Word spread that



East Germans in Trabant cars queue to cross the Glienicker Bridge into West Berlin.

people were going through at Bornholmer Strasse. The guards at the other official crossing-points, confused and without proper orders, heaved up the barriers – some of them rusted into place from disuse – and allowed the crowds through. On the other side of the wall they met West Berliners who had come to greet them carrying whatever they could pick up as gifts: hot drinks, flowers and champagne.

11.59 pm

By midnight, the border guards had received official orders to open the

gates. There were queues of East German Trabant cars at each crossing-point, filled with East Berliners. Some were still wearing their pyjamas. A street party broke out in West Berlin. Just after midnight, a young man climbed up on his friend's shoulders and clambered onto the wall. Only hours before he might have been shot. Now the top of the wall became a sea of dancing figures, spraying champagne over the crowds below. Someone brought out some fireworks, and gaudy rockets began soaring over the celebrations.

A narrow escape

“ We didn't get any instructions from our superiors, none. Only, 'observe the situation'. We tried many times to speak to our superiors, but nobody got back to us. You have to bear in mind that our soldiers were fully armed on this day as always. And they had one order [shoot anyone who tries to cross]. ”

Lothar Stein, a guard on duty that night, recalls how the celebrations might have turned to tragedy. Quoted in the CNN television documentary The Wall Comes Down.

On the night of 9 November 1989, a celebration began on top of the Berlin Wall.

