Geography

The German Democratic Republic (DDR = Deutsche Demokratische Republik) was a state in Central Europe, which existed from 7 October, 1949 to 2 October, 1990. It was called into being by the Soviet Union in the Russian Occupation Zone as a reaction to the creation of the German Federal Republic (BRD = Bundesrepublik Deutschland) in the so-called Trizone of the Western occupation powers (USA, Great Britain and France). The territory of the
DDR consisted of the present federal states of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Brandenburg, Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt and Thuringia, together with East Berlin. Until the coming into force of the Basic Treaty of 1973 between West and East Germany, the DDR was recognized only by East Block states, but not in the West. On the basis of a law passed in 1990 by the first freely elected parliament of the DDR, the country was integrated into the German Federal Republic on 3 October, 1990, thus putting an end to the DDR.

Basic facts

**Official language:** German  
**Capital:** the Eastern Sector of Berlin, called officially “Berlin, Capital of the German Democratic Republic”, but generally called East Berlin in the West  
**Government:** a socialist people’s republic  
**Chief of state:** officially the State Council of the DDR constituted a collective head of state, but, for purposes of protocol, the Chairman of the State Council functioned as chief of state. A separate Council of Ministers under the Minister President served officially as the government. De facto, decisions were made by the Central Committee of the communist party, the SED  
**Area:** 100 000 km² (united Germany: 358 000 km²)  
**Population:** 16 million (united Germany: 83 million)  
**Population density:** 151 inhabitants pro km² (united Germany: 231)  
**Currency:** DDR mark  
**Religious affiliation:**  
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Protestant Church</th>
<th>Catholic Church</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1950: 80 %</td>
<td>10 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970: 60 %</td>
<td>no data</td>
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<tr>
<td>1989: 30 %</td>
<td>5 %</td>
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Historical benchmarks

**7 October, 1949:** five months after the founding of the Federal Republic in the West, the government established by the Russians in their occupation zone declared the creation of a “Workers and Farmers State”.  
**1949:** the constitution of the DDR granted to the Protestant Church the status of a public corporate body with the rights of self-determination and inalienable property.  
**1952:** Stalin’s proposal for a neutral, united Germany was rejected by the BRD government under Konrad Adenauer and by the Western Allies. The collectivisation of agriculture and the nationalisation of business were then intensified.  
**17. June, 1953:** in East Berlin, workers demonstrated against the increased production quotas. The next day, a wave of demonstrations against the Communist Party dictatorship spread across the country. Fearing revolution, the government asked the aid of the Soviet occupation troops, who dealt harshly with the protesters, resulting in numerous deaths and arrests.  
**13 August, 1961:** the Berlin Wall was constructed. The inner German border was reinforced with separation barriers, mines, spring guns, and border guards with orders to shoot.  
**Since 1968:** with the Ostpolitik of the West German government under the leadership of Willy Brand (Foreign Minister 1966-69; Chancellor 1969-74), the two sides approached one another. The BRD abandoned its claim of sole representation and the DDR acknowledged that the Germans constitute one people living in two states.
1968: The new constitution of the DDR restricted the rights of the Church. Only acts of worship and charity continued to enjoy legal protection.

From 1973 on: In the course of the policy of détente and under pressure from the USSR, the DDR government offered cooperation to the Protestant Church.

1978: Erich Honecker (Chief of State) and Bishop Schönherr (Chairman of the Protestant Church Federation) met in a summit conference to deal with the relationship between church and state. Honecker acknowledged “the autonomous activity of the church as a significant factor in social life now and in the future”.

1980’s: opposition groups began meeting under the protection of the churches. The church became the mouthpiece of system critics.

1986: the Initiative for Peace and Human Rights was founded.

19 January, 1989: Erich Honecker proclaimed that the Wall would endure for another fifty or a hundred years, if the conditions which led to its constructions remained unchanged.

May 1989: Hungary began to dismantle the border barriers to Austria. Hungary thus became an escape hatch for citizens of Eastern Block countries fleeing to the West. In the same month, the evident election fraud in the East German communal elections led to demonstrations against the government, which were put down by the police.

Summer 1989: tens of thousands of East Germans fled to the West via Hungary and Austria or took refuge in the West German embassies in Budapest, Prague and Warsaw, from which they were allowed to exit to the West in late August / September.

7/8 July, 1989: Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev called for “separate solutions to national problems”, signaling that the Soviet Union would not intervene in the affairs of the other Eastern countries.

4 September, 1989: in Leipzig, the series of non-violent “Monday Demonstrations” for peace, freedom, and democracy began in connection with the prayers for peace at the Nikolai Church. The deterioration of the economic situation and the disappointment with Honecker’s refusal to carry out reforms caused the movement to swell and spread to other cities as well.

7 October, 1989: During his visit to East Berlin to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the founding of the DDR, Gorbachev called for fundamental reforms.

9 October, 1989: in Leipzig, some 70 000 people took part in the Monday Demonstration. An appeal by six prominent persons prevented a clash between demonstrators and the police.

18 October, 1989: Honecker was forced to resign. Egon Krenz, the new head of the Communist Party, spoke of a “Wende” (= turning) in his inaugural address.

23 October, 1989: At the Monday Demonstration in Leipzig, some 300 000 joined in the call “We are the people!”

4 November, 1989: in East Berlin over 1 million people participated in a peaceful demonstration.

9 November, 1989: The Berlin Wall fell symbolically, when the border checkpoints were opened.

13 November, 1989: the parliament elected Hans Modrow as Chairman of the Council of Ministers and thus head of government. During his presidency, the roundtable discussions with the opposition were inaugurated as a second level of democratic participation.

18 March, 1990: the first free parliamentary elections were held.

3 October, 1990: the reunification was completed with the entry of the East German states into the Federal Republic of Germany.
Political opposition

The notion of “DDR opposition” encompasses a spectrum of diverse forms of opposition within the German Democratic Republic. The civil rights activists of the DDR strove, for the most part, for the reform rather than for the abolition of their country. Nevertheless, they had to endure surveillance and repression at the hands of the Ministry of State Security (Stasi). During the so-called “Wendezeit” (1989/90), they founded a number of political parties and civil rights movements like the Neue Forum and the Demokratischer Aufbruch. After the Wendezeit, they joined diverse political parties (CDU, SPD, Greens, PDS) or remained outside the party system altogether. Political dissidents were closely monitored by official and unofficial agents of the all-encompassing surveillance system of the Ministry of State Security to nip in the bud any overt criticism of the DDR. Politically motivated persecution in the DDR ranged from subtle intimidation to long imprisonment. In the arrest centres of the Stasi, torture and solitary confinement were the order of the day. In extreme cases, abductions and murders were carried out by secret order of the Stasi.

Religions

The principal religious role was played by the Christian churches, especially the eight Protestant regional churches united, since 1969, in the Federation of Evangelical Churches in the DDR and also, with far fewer members, the Roman Catholic Church. In addition, there were diverse free churches with relatively small membership. Alongside the Christian churches, there existed a few Jewish communities and, in the 80’s small Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim groups were formed. The religious organisations were the only legal organisations not under state control. Religious freedom in the DDR was guaranteed by the constitution and was respected formally. But, with various strategies and methods, the state sought to repress religious influence, particularly among young people. Nevertheless, the policies of the DDR could not prevent the Christian churches from constituting an autonomous social factor.