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Russian, Eurasian, and East European Studies

The Collapse: The Accidental Opening of the Berlin Wall

On November 11, the Harriman Institute hosted Mary Elise Sarotte, professor of history at Harvard and the University of Southern California, to talk about her new book, *Collapse: The Accidental Opening of the Berlin Wall*. Sarotte's book emphasizes the impact that individual decisions made by mid- and low-level German officials had on the actions of world leaders. In her telling, the Berlin Wall fell as the result of a series of uncoordinated, accidental occurrences that took everyone by surprise; occurrences that could easily have ended in blood.

Sarotte opened by criticizing the triumphalist narrative that surrounds our image of the fall of the Berlin Wall. She showed images of exhibits outside the Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush presidential libraries. In the former, a segment of the wall stands like a monolith over a manicured lawn, in the latter, three copper stallions leap over a wall fragment. The message is the same in both: this president tore down the iron curtain and destroyed the ultimate symbol of oppression. The truth, Sarotte argues, is not only more complicated, but contradicts the narrative that has become common in the United States, and still "has an impact on U.S. foreign policy." She blames this oversight in part on historians, claiming that they have spent too much time looking at the global context of the Berlin Wall and not enough time looking at the events on the ground. "The narrative of the wall that divided Germany does not have Germans in it," she says.

Sarotte displayed an image from Tiananmen Square in Beijing, where a bloody crackdown on dissidents occurred in the same year as German reunification. "There was no guarantee that European Communist regimes would respond to dissidents any more peacefully than the Chinese one did," says Sarotte. In her view, East Germany came closer to a Tiananmen-style crackdown than we care to remember. According to Sarotte, there were two precipitating events: massive protests in Leipzig, and a botched press conference that led to one low-level official's decision to break the wall.

If we lose sight of the happenstance involved, Sarotte says, the wall becomes a symbol instead of a historical reality.

In the summer of 1989, Hungary opened its border to Austria, which had open borders with its Western neighbors. When news of this opening became public, East Germans began streaming toward Hungary, in hopes of making it to West Germany. In response, the East German government sealed its own borders from all its neighbors, even its Warsaw Pact allies. East Germans began to agitate and massive protests overtook Leipzig. The East German government decided to crack down on these demonstrations, planning a military response modeled after the Tiananmen Square massacre. That evening, however, the military commander in Leipzig called in sick, leaving his deputy in charge. This deputy never gave the order to fire on the protesters, and they successfully marched around the city. Video of the massive protest was smuggled to the West and broadcast into East Germany. Public awareness set the stage for what happened next.

A month later, in response to the protests, the government allowed for a minor easing of the border closure. The public official tasked with announcing this concession, misread the order. Instead, he told journalists at a press conference that the checkpoints of the Berlin Wall would be opened, effective immediately. A few minutes later, radio and television news reported that the Berlin Wall was open. East Germans rushed to the wall that night. Harald Jager was in charge of the Bornholmer Street checkpoint. Jager decided, after several attempts to deal with the thousands of people gathered at his gate, that he could either shoot the citizens or let them through. He let them through. The media showed images of people streaming over the bridge, which inspired guards at the other checkpoints to follow Jager's lead. By the time bureaucrats in Moscow or East Berlin were able to gather and address the

problem, the wall had opened and could no longer be closed.

Sarotte emphasized how close we came to a tragic ending: Leipzig was supposed to end in a bloody crackdown, and Bornholmer Street could have turned into the Bornholmer massacre had Jager made a different decision. Both of these incidents, Sarotte says, give the lie to self-congratulatory Western ideas of how and why the

wall opened. Our failure to remember the accidental nature of the occurrence has colored our dealings not only in post-Soviet Europe, but also in the rest of the world.

*Reported by Matthew Van Meter
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