Peaceful Revolution: How Did GDR Pastors Manage to Organize the Monday Demonstrations?

Researchers find: A network of personal contacts connected the entire country — with surprising consequences. Numbers help to objectify a long-held perception of the period of upheaval.

The first Round Table convened on 7 December 1989 in the Dietrich Bonhoeffer House in Berlin-Mitte, a building of the Protestant Church. Pastors moderated under the Moravian star.

The boom of pastors is over. Yes, at Christmas, when even the most godless go to church once, men and women in cassocks can reliably expect a large audience — tradition!
But the role that the small professional group of pastors and theologians played in politics and society before and after 1989 is history. Back then, when the collapse of the GDR and its institutions left a huge vacuum, it was above all concentrated Protestantism — shaped under German parsonage roofs — that stood ready and experienced its great moment. The oppositional work in the GDR had endowed it with moral authority. The government led by the committed Protestant Lothar de Maizière relied on pastors and theologians such as Rainer Eppelmann, Markus Meckel, Gottfried Müller, or Hans-Wilhelm Ebeling. The pastor's daughter Angela Merkel became Chancellor, the pastor Joachim Gauck became President, and the committed Catholic Wolfgang Thierse became President of the Bundestag — to name only the most prominent.

Decline of pastors, decline of congregations

Tempora passata. Today, lawyers and political scientists govern. Pastors are also disappearing from the parishes. Many are retiring. It is long since normal that one pastor serves several congregations. And Christians are leaving the churches; in 2024 alone, one million people nationwide left. The autumn synod of the Evangelical Church Berlin-Brandenburg-Silesian Upper Lusatia (EKBO) stated at the end of November 2025 that on the reference date of 1 January 2025 there were only 525 congregations left; within three years, the number had fallen to less than half.

This is because increasingly more congregations fell below the required minimum of 500 members and were consequently merged. On 1 September 2025, only 809 individuals remained in active pastoral service.

Civil Activists and citizens at the Monday Prayers on Ocotber 9, 1989 in the Nikolai Church Leipzig; Waltraud Grubitzsch/dpa

As the main reason for the membership decline, the EKBO states: “Above all, faith is losing relevance in people’s lives.” At the recent assembly, the synod decided to append the claim “Church in the East” to its unwieldy name. This sounds like a desire for self-assertion and an attempt to offer an identity. But gendering continues. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, no one in church circles could complain about a lack of relevance.

But how did the comparatively few church people in the GDR — under constant surveillance and threat of repression — manage to exert such enormous influence on the start and development of the Peaceful Revolution? Three researchers took up this question and attempted to objectify the widely shared perception — using mathematical methods as well.

Johannes Buggle (University of Innsbruck), Max Deter (University of Potsdam), and Martin Lange (Leibniz Centre for European Economic Research) uncovered surprising new details in their study “Networks of Resistance: Social Leaders and Protest in an Autocracy.”

Revolutions did not belong to the repertoire of the German parsonage in the 20th century. Especially the Protestant parsonage traditionally supported the state as a central institution, determined morality, blessed the suppression of the individual, and demanded conformity and submission.

That provided structure and stability — and forged a work ethic renowned worldwide. What comes to mind when one thinks of the Protestant German parsonage? For example, Michael Haneke’s prize-winning 2009 film The White Ribbon, with its relentless moral austerity and brutal emotional coldness toward children and adolescents. One may also recall the morally saccharine “Words for Sunday” — public broadcasting’s niche for inner reflection, typically filled with bland platitudes.

Or the spiritual soothing provided by Margot Käßmann. (One of us, after all — even she once strayed from the right path.) The Protestant Church fared very badly under National Socialism: Protestants contributed significantly (far more than Catholics) to the success of the Nazis.And finally, one thinks of the nearly 10,000 cases of sexualized violence against children in the Protestant Church and diaconal institutions — and of the painful struggle toward honesty.

“Practice always faithfulness and honesty”

Despite everything — even for the most godless — Protestantism belongs to Berlin and Brandenburg like capers belong to Königsberg meatballs. Everywhere villages cherish their little churches, even when hardly any Christians remain and the congregation is poor. The church is a root into history; this cultural region is unimaginable without Martin Luther. To this day, from the French Cathedral on the Gendarmenmarkt, the popular hymn still rings out to a Mozart melody:

“Practice always faithfulness and honesty / Until your cold grave / And do not stray a finger’s breadth / From God’s ways!” — Nothing could be more Prussian-Protestant.

Church leaders had arranged themselves with the GDR state. At the same time, churches offered spaces of freedom — for environmental, peace, and Third World groups, even when these were not religiously motivated; for rebels expelled from the system. Here, alternatives to the repressive state could be discussed. Here, civil rights activists met.

At the time of the Wende, pastors led the Monday demonstrations that ultimately brought down the ruling party — the mother of all marches began at Leipzig’s St. Nicholas Church, where Christian Führer had been pastor since 1980. Indeed, the study shows clearly: all roads led to Leipzig or flowed from there into the remotest corners of the country.

On 9 October 1989, thousands gathered at the ring road around Leipzig's inner city after the Monday demonstration. Aram Radomski/akg-images

The role Leipzig played becomes evident in a tiny notice published on 17 October 1989 in the party press — including the Berliner Zeitung. It was the first report of a demonstration. The few lines came from the highest authority via ADN (the official news agency), including precise instructions on placement: page 2, top priority, fourth column. Under the sober heading "Demonstration in Leipzig," it read:

"After peace prayers in five Leipzig churches, tens of thousands of citizens of the trade fair city, as well as from the Leipzig district and adjacent territories, gathered yesterday for a demonstration. Thanks to the restraint of the security forces and the demonstrators, no disturbances occurred."

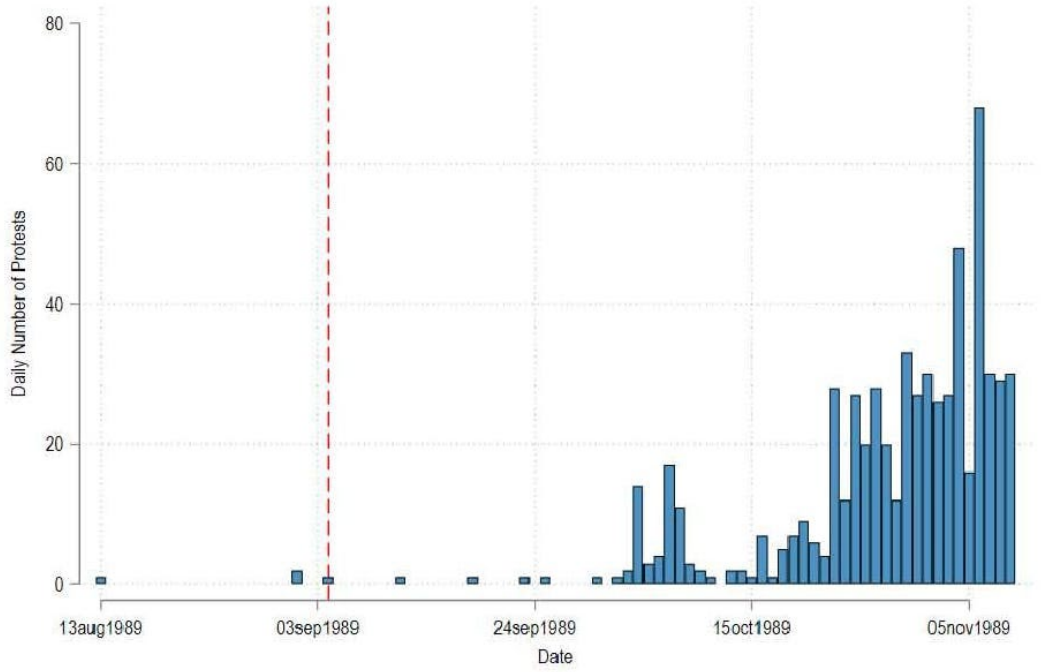
The wind had turned. Just a week earlier, counter-propaganda had been used. On 7 October, the 40th anniversary of the GDR, when people took to the streets, the news described "disturbances of peace and order," "anti-socialist riots," and "provocative mobs." "Citizens of all classes and strata" allegedly expressed outrage at the peaceful demonstrators. Police had used massive violence.

Data from 1,600 pastors speak

Since 17 October it was clear that those within the SED leadership who rejected violence against their own population had prevailed. From then on, demonstrating no longer threatened one's existence. Attendance at Monday demonstrations skyrocketed week by week. Buggle, Deter, and Lange examined a question relevant to all authoritarian systems — Russia or Afghanistan included: How can people organize resistance despite surveillance and persecution? How do they move from silent frustration to action, and how do they coordinate that action?

They studied how protests spread in the late GDR, where expressing one's opinion could cost one's job, freedom, or worse — and they explained why protests jumped so quickly from city to city. They studied personal networks, especially among trusted local leaders, and showed that the nationwide connections between Protestant pastors were a decisive factor. Local church leaders were linked through their studies and years of shared work. They maintained their relationships; information flowed; people came together; a quiet but powerful movement emerged. The researchers collected detailed information on more than 1,600 Protestant pastors, tracing where they studied and served over time.

This yielded a map of connections between cities. This network was compared with protest data from 645 East German cities and weekly records from the months before the collapse of the SED regime.



Entwicklung der Demonstrationen in der DDR im Herbst 1989. Die rote Linie markiert den ersten Protest in der Leipziger Innenstadt am 4. September 1989. Johannes Buggle, Max Deter, Martin Lange/Berlin School of Economics

The results were unambiguous

If a city was connected by a pastor to another city, the probability that a protest would break out there in the following week increased by 4.9 percentage points. The researchers acknowledge that this number seems small, but given the rarity of protests at the time, it meant that these networks increased the likelihood of protest by more than 60 percent. The effect was even stronger when a city was connected to Leipzig.

Could it be that politically minded pastors deliberately chose to live in rebellious cities? To rule this out, the researchers looked only at connections formed during the first jobs — usually assigned by church authorities, not self-chosen. They also conducted a placebo test examining pastors without real personal ties. The study also identified "central pastors," who had more connections and greater influence on the spread of protest.

Additional findings: In cities far from Leipzig, where news spread less easily, pastoral networks were especially helpful for conveying direct personal information. And in places suffering from local grievances such as pollution or poor living conditions, pastoral networks were particularly effective at transforming frustration into organized action. Often, protests that began in churches spread to both religious and non-religious environments.

Hollowed-out power: Even SED members wanted change

The conclusion: Without the pastors' networks, there would have been about 30 percent fewer protests during the ten weeks of the Peaceful Revolution — only 380 instead of 566. This marks the difference between a few scattered protests and a nationwide movement. But would the remaining 70 percent have been enough to collapse the system?

Other research, such as that of Sabine Pannen, shows the internal decay of the SED party base — how hollow and brittle the main pillar of power had become. Of the roughly 2.3 million members and candidates of the Socialist Unity Party, a significant proportion wanted change — entirely independent of pastoral networks. But truth be told: they did not dare take to the streets on their own initiative.