

# **From Debris to Party Beats: How The Fall of The Berlin Wall Shaped Techno music**

By  
Nyah Estevez

Advised by  
Dr. Bianca Gavin



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**Abstract**

This research paper analyzes how techno music was used as a political tool to reunify Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall. To answer this question, I studied the history of the Berlin Wall and music policies in East and West Germany during the Cold War period. Then I looked at the reunification era and explored the invention of techno music, and its trends from the 1990s to the 21st century. I found techno music reclaimed the geographical locations that once represented a divided country, but now are places where both East and West Germans come together. These findings can be used to show how music is / has been a form of activism, and it also can be used to explore how Germany fostered a cultural identity after years of contention.

**Keywords**

*Political Science, Germany Identity, The Cold War, Political activism, Music*

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## **Introduction**

After World War II, Germany was forced to embark on a journey of intense reconstruction. With all of its efforts to restore its infrastructure, reestablish its political systems, and recover their own economy- the Berlin Wall acted as yet another barrier for the country to get through literally and figuratively. The postwar era had a lot of defining qualities to it, and one that often gets overlooked by historians is the evolution of music. Artists were reinventing themselves and their style based on the sociopolitical events that were happening around them. The Cold War pushed not only German artists to change their sound, but American and British ones too. People around the world were making music that resembled the military occupation occurring within the borders. In the event that historians address this part of the past, they often survey how musicians in East and West Germany dealt with the events leading up to the fall of the Berlin Wall. This is crucial in the discussion of how the infamous Iron Curtain ceased to prevail, however, it is important to take this a step further and analyze how the fall itself created a new era of German music, namely electronic dance music (also known as techno). Both East and West Germans created an entire political movement and social scene through techno as a result of reunification. Studying the effects of this will demonstrate the importance of music as a means of political action, and will reveal the effectiveness of music as a tool to unify a divided country.

## **History of the Berlin Wall (East and West Germany 1970-1980s)**

In order to effectively analyze the role the Berlin Wall had on German music, it is crucial to first discuss the politics of the Wall itself. The history of the Berlin Wall will offer a bridge between the country's politics and its music scene. Additionally, it will contextualize the political tension that shaped the invention of techno music within Germany. The Berlin Wall has come to

take on many meanings over the years- particularly when comparing the time it was built in 1961, to when it came down in 1989.<sup>1</sup> At its core, the Berlin Wall was a physical barrier that created a division within Germany. It was a location that represented contestation between the Federal Democratic Republic (the FDR) and the German Democratic Republic (the GDR) in their ongoing feud for political legitimacy.<sup>2</sup>

When World War II ended in 1945, Germany was split into two different territories at the Yalta-and Potsdam peace conferences.<sup>3</sup> The outcome was that the eastern part of the country would be controlled by the Soviet Union, and the West would be run by the United States, Great Britain, and France (the Allies).<sup>4</sup> Berlin itself is a city located in East Germany, however, the conferences declared that the city be divided the same way. East Berlin went to the Soviets, while the West went to the Allies. The existence of a city with such stark political and cultural differences resulted in a Soviet blockade; which intentionally relinquished any influence from the Allied states within Eastern Berlin. Many East Germans left the GDR towards the Federal Republic to seek refuge.<sup>5</sup> In fact, “in the first 11 days of August, 16,000 East Germans crossed the border into West Berlin, and on August 12 some 2,400 followed—the largest number of defectors ever to leave East Germany in a single day.”<sup>6</sup> An overnight decision was made by the Eastern government and the plan for the Berlin Wall was approved by the GDR on August 13, 1961.<sup>7</sup> The objective was to prevent East Germans from leaving and undercut the socialist state that was the FDR. It was not only a physical barrier that divided Germany into two different

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<sup>1</sup> Pertiti 2011

<sup>2</sup> Pertiti 2011

<sup>3</sup> History.com Editors 2009

<sup>4</sup> History.com Editors 2009

<sup>5</sup> Harrison 2011

<sup>6</sup> History.com Editors 2009

<sup>7</sup> History.com Editors 2009

governments, it was also a symbol of competing postwar worldviews between the Soviet Union and its Western adversaries.

### **Music in East and West Germany (1960s-1970s)**

#### West German music

In response to Cold War tensions, and all that came with the construction of the Berlin Wall, Germans turned to music as a mechanism to reflect upon the politics at the time. People used music to establish their own opinions on the Wall; however, the style of music accepted in both East and West Germany varied tremendously due to contradicting policy restrictions. In West Germany, the FDR was extremely democratized and took on a much more capitalist approach than the East; the same model of the Allied states. This westernized approach to governance allowed for a very permissive policy system when it came to the production of media and music within its Western borders.<sup>8</sup> In other words, West German musicians were able to express themselves in a nonrestrictive environment.<sup>9</sup> Music historian John Tyler Patty researches music and political activism in Cold War Germany, and calls attention to the influence of American and British music on West German music trends and protest movements during the 1960s and 1970s. Thus, a discussion must be had on what West German musicians did with their legal freedom and what that meant for German politics.

#### American and British influence on West German music

During the first half of the twentieth century, there were new technological advancements in media broadcasting that reshaped countries' political norms. The distinctions between Americanization and Westernization were growing thin and politics began to question what exactly constituted "Democracy." In his research, John Tyler Patty reveals that by the 1960s

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<sup>8</sup> Mouton 2019

<sup>9</sup> Mouton 2019

“radio made music and news readily available to almost everyone.”<sup>10</sup> West Germans were becoming exposed to American and British music through the American Armed Forces Network (AFN) and Radio Luxembourg.<sup>11</sup> A well-known case of western influence on West German artists is Udo Lindenberg. Lindenberg, well-known West German artist, has credited Elvis and Bill Haley, among many other American artists, “for motivating him to become a musician.”<sup>12</sup> That being said, due to the prominent presence of American and British music in Western Germans media, the messages both parts of the world were producing became very similar. By the 1980s, the non-restrictive music policies in West Germany allowed for artists to advocate for reunification.<sup>13</sup> There was a new political message in the German music scene surrounding liberation- and this ultimately brought new hope for Germans during this time.

### East German music

Unlike the privileges West German musicians had in producing music under a democratic government, music in East Germany was a direct reflection of the GDR and Soviet culture. The GDR completely restricted the media East Germans were consuming. This meant that both TV and music were heavily policed and anything released to the public had to abide by rigid regulations. In the eyes of the GDR, the ultimate goal for soviet music was to inspire people to return to their so-called German roots.<sup>14</sup> The government was determined to convince the population of their so-called privilege and superiority from living under communism- and this was completely intentional.<sup>15</sup> When the initial split occurred, East Germans refused to conform to communism- not because the GDR failed in converting its residents, but because “its residents

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<sup>10</sup> Patty 2014

<sup>11</sup> Patty 2014

<sup>12</sup> Mouton 2019

<sup>13</sup> Mouton 2019

<sup>14</sup> Mouton 2019

<sup>15</sup> Mouton 2019

were already immersed in the Western culture that permeated through the Iron Curtain.”<sup>16</sup> The GDR decided the best way to portray America as the oppressor was to ban any Western artistic influences- and that included artists themselves.<sup>17</sup> East Germans were forced to produce and listen to music that promoted their government in a positive light. Anything outside of this would have been unlawful.

### West German influence on East German activism

Although East Germans were banned from watching any media produced by the West, many people rebelled and watched behind closed doors- until 1980. By 1980, the GDR opened its borders to West German artists, specifically an electronic band called “Tangerine Dream,” who often played in TV shows that aired in Eastern Germany. They became so successful they were granted the opportunity to perform in the East at the Palast der Republik on January 31, 1980.<sup>18</sup> The primary reason they were able to do this was due to the music Tangerine Dream was producing. The band’s songs did not have any lyrics, and so the GDR deemed it as “unpolitical.”<sup>19</sup> In an article with one of the musicians involved with the band, Paule Fuchs, revealed “ ‘Getting hold of equipment was quite an ordeal. For a start, you had to earn loads of money to be able to afford stuff from the West. Then this money had to be ‘planned,’ exchanged into West German marks. That was prohibited, and if you got caught you ended up in prison.’ ”<sup>20</sup> It was both difficult for West German artists to produce music that the GDR accepted, and almost impossible to obtain the appropriate equipment because of the government’s restrictive policies.<sup>21</sup>

Once Tangerine Dream performed in East Germany, more West German musicians began to play live performances in the East. Authors Monica Meldrum and Dr. Michelle Mouton reflect

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<sup>16</sup> Mouton 2019

<sup>17</sup> Mouton 2019

<sup>18</sup> Sievers 2013

<sup>19</sup> Sievers 2013

<sup>20</sup> Sievers 2013

<sup>21</sup> Sievers 2013

on Udo Lindenberg and his contribution to the East. They reveal that American music inspired his creative processes as a musician, and by the 1980's Lindenberg used music to defy the politics of the Cold War. In fact, Lindenberg requested to perform in East Germany multiple times and was finally allowed to on October 25, 1983 at the Palace of the Republic.<sup>22</sup> The crowd was said to be filled with people from the Free German Youth Group (FDJ), and at the end of his set he declared: “ ‘We want peace, neither a cold nor a hot war.’ ”<sup>23</sup> Due to this outward defiance of GDR policies, Lindenberg was banned from East Germany in 1984.<sup>24</sup> It was West German musicians, such as Lindenburg, who put their careers and lives on the line in order to stand up against the Cold War. This political defiance proved to be effective because it sparked conversation amongst Eastern Germans- so much conversation that the GDR took the step to completely ban West German musicians from performing in the East entirely. It was West German hardcore beats that prompted people in the East to be interested in this newfound liberation- and the GDR felt threatened. Regardless of all of the policy restrictions, electronic music in the East prevailed and empowered the citizens of East Germany to question their government. Many East Germans let electronic beats empower them and be a source of rebellion. In short, “political music gave hope to the German population on both sides of the Iron Curtain during the darkest of days of the Cold War.”<sup>25</sup>

### **Reunification (Germany in the 1980-1990s)**

On January 19, 1989 East German leader Erich Honecker declared that the Berlin Wall “ ‘will exist in 50 and even in 100 years, if the reasons for it are not overcome.’ ”<sup>26</sup> However, despite the confidence in his words, the Wall came down that year on November 9th.<sup>27</sup> A large

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<sup>22</sup> Mouton 2019

<sup>23</sup> Mouton 2019

<sup>24</sup> Mouton 2019

<sup>25</sup> Mouton 2019

<sup>26</sup> “Timeline of events that led to the fall of the Berlin Wall.” 2019

<sup>27</sup> “Timeline of events that led to the fall of the Berlin Wall.” 2019

reason for the fall of the Wall was due to the protest movements that occurred between January and November; both within and outside its borders. The most well-known launched mass demonstrations occurred within the European borders of Poland, Hungary, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Prague.<sup>28</sup> It paved the way for the first mass protest in East Germany, which began within the city of Leipzig. As the days passed, the protests only grew in more numbers. For instance, on October 9th (which was the 40th anniversary of the GDR) 70,000 East Germany took the street to protest.<sup>29</sup> Finally, on November 9th the spokesperson for the GDR announced “a change in his city’s relations with the West”<sup>30</sup> and by the end of the day East Germans were free to cross to the other side of the Berlin Wall.<sup>31</sup> People knocked down the wall with hammers and picks, while cranes and bulldozers were not far from following them.<sup>32</sup> It was the citizens of Germany themselves who knocked down the wall; giving birth to a completely new life.

### **Invention of techno music (1990s)**

Before there can be a discussion on techno music in Germany and its influence on the reunification era, two things must be recognized. The first is that modern techno sound has its origins in Detroit, Michigan. The second is that the German band called Kraftwerk have been accredited for its pioneering approach on Detroit musicians. Kraftwerk formed in the 1960’s, and they have often been a source for German identity during the height of the techno scene in the 1990s.<sup>33</sup> It was the way Kraftwerk used “synthesizers and sequenced drum arrangements to evoke robotic or industrial rhythms”<sup>34</sup> that shaped the electronic sound Detroit musicians were producing.<sup>35</sup> That being said, during the 1980’s Detroit was experiencing the aftermath of 1960’s

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<sup>28</sup> “Fall of Berlin Wall: How 1989 reshaped the modern world.” 2019

<sup>29</sup> “Timeline of events that led to the fall of the Berlin Wall.” 2019

<sup>30</sup> History.com Editors. 2009

<sup>31</sup> History.com Editors. 2009

<sup>32</sup> History.com Editors. 2009

<sup>33</sup> Shannon and Kyle 2020

<sup>34</sup> Shannon and Kyle 2020

<sup>35</sup> Shannon and Kyle 2020

violence, economic collapse, and white flight.<sup>36</sup> Many have said this was “a perfect incubator for techno’s postindustrial sound.”<sup>37</sup> Juan Atkins, Derrick May, and Keven Saunderson; all who were Black students living in a suburb that was predominately white, felt the effects of 1980’s Detroit struggles and decided to make techno music.<sup>38</sup> They were inspired by Kraftwerk and believed that their music was the future. “In 1988, Virgin Records wanted to release a compilation album in the United Kingdom with all of Detroit’s rising stars, including May, Atkins, and Saunderson. As the record was coming together, Atkins submitted his new song ‘Techno City’ for his contribution.”<sup>39</sup> The producers then changed the title of the record to *Techno! The New Dance Sound of Detroit*.<sup>40</sup> This was the first time the term “techno” was used to describe the genre.<sup>41</sup> In Europe the record did not gain commercial popularity; however, it did catch the attention of the European rave scene and many artists adapted to this newfound sound. All this to say, it is important to acknowledge techno’s origins because the scene has traditionally been associated with Germany, and very little recognition is ever given to the Black community in Detroit, Michigan for its creation. There are many parallels to what was occurring in Michigan and in reunified Germany during the 1990’s, thus there is no surprise that Germany adopted the sound.

After techno music took off in Germany, the era of reunification brought a new found element to it. A prime case study of techno music in the 1990s is the story of how the techno club, Tresor came to be. *Der Klang Der Familie Berlin, Techno and the Fall of the Wall* by Felix Denk is a pivotal book in documenting techno music during the 1990’s, and a large portion of it sheds light on Tresor’s origins. Denk uses interviews with Tresor’s founders to contextualize how techno music manifested itself during reunification. He reveals that Dimitri Hegemann and

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<sup>36</sup> Havey

<sup>37</sup> Havey

<sup>38</sup> Havey

<sup>39</sup> Havey

<sup>40</sup> Havey

<sup>41</sup> Havey

Johnnie Stieler founded Tresor as a result of club UFO closing. Tresor officially opened on March 13, 1991 at Leipziger Straße 126 in East Berlin.<sup>42</sup> It was “a joint venture between East and West and while the relationships were not always harmonious, there was much less friction than in society in general. It was a project on equal terms.”<sup>43</sup> Tresor became a location where both East and West Germans met each other and expressed their passion for music, regardless of opposing views on reunification. It grew in success and became so well-known that infamous Detroit DJ Jeff Mills performed with DJ Dimitri Hegemann, and French DJ Laurent Garnier.<sup>44</sup>

After the fall of the GDR, there were a lot of vacant buildings in the East. “Suddenly, there were all these spaces to discover: a panzer chamber in the dusty no man’s land of the former death strip, a World War II bunker, a decommissioned soap factory on the Spree, a transformer station opposite the erstwhile Reich Ministry of Aviation.”<sup>45</sup> When this part of history is applied to the story of Tresor, it can be revealed that the structure of the building itself helped create the German techno sound. During the summer of 1990, the techno scene in Berlin was in need of a new location to flourish. Dimitri Hegemann and Johnnie Stieler made use of the political and economic situation of East Berlin during that time and secured an abandoned building through a Stasi superintendent who worked at the East German diplomatic services agency.<sup>46</sup> Before the war, the building of Tresor was the Wetheim department store.<sup>47</sup> Still in 1990, it had many remnants of the past wars.<sup>48</sup> Hegemann and Stieler describe the walls of the building to be over a meter (3.3 feet) thick. They state: “ ‘Nothing got through them. The world could have ended, an atomic bomb could have been dropped, and you’d still be praying down

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<sup>42</sup> Tresor Berlin

<sup>43</sup> Bychawski 2014

<sup>44</sup> Bychawski 2014

<sup>45</sup> Denk and Sven 2014

<sup>46</sup> Denk and Sven 2014

<sup>47</sup> Denk and Sven 2014

<sup>48</sup> Denk and Sven 2014

there.’<sup>49</sup> Despite how economically beneficial it was to buy a deserted building from the Cold War in East Berlin during the 1990’s, the density of the building itself meant that the electronic beats DJs played were trapped and concentrated within those four walls. This created a much more intense listening experience and pushed people to completely surrender to the music. DJ’s were able to turn up the bass and play their beats at a much louder volume than they otherwise would have done in a different location.

The actual building of Tresor was a historical artifact to the very recent wars the country had just experienced, thus the locations of techno clubs themselves are a large factor to how reunification was achieved in Germany- socially. “People were dancing at all these sites rejected by recent history, to a music virtually reinvented from week to week.”<sup>50</sup> There is a therapeutic element in all of this. During the 1990’s, people were redefining the buildings of the East and assigning an entirely new cultural significance to them. Tresor is not an independent story from other techno clubs. In fact, most places that played techno music existed within buildings that had this type of layout and history. Locations, like Tresor, are reminders to the public today that the country was not always unified; however, it was the people from both the West and East that came together to establish what reunification was going to mean for the country and where the country was going.

### **Techno music trends in Germany (1990s)**

Once techno music had established locations where it would be played in, such as Tresor, the German techno scene grew and became more intense. With techno clubs opening up all around East Germany in the 1990s, many magazines and radio stations started to talk about techno music in a much more serious matter. In fact, several magazines were established with the

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<sup>49</sup> Denk and Sven 2014

<sup>50</sup> Denk and Sven 2014

intent of covering techno. A prime example of this is the magazine called *Frontpage*. Launched in 1989, *Frontpage* was a local promotional tool to spread awareness about the techno scene, and about the techno club in Frankfurt called *Technoclub*.<sup>51</sup> The founder of *Technoclub*, Alex Azary, wanted to make a zine for the establishment and thus gave birth to *Frontpage*.<sup>52</sup> Although the magazine was only known for covering Frankfurt, over time it caught the attention of Germans in other locations and the editor, Jürgen Laarmann, eventually moved the magazine to “a more progressive frontier- Berlin.”<sup>53</sup> As they were documenting the scene, *Frontpage* quickly realized “There was nowhere that German reunification worked better than in the techno scene. On the dance floor, with smoke, strobes, and a Westbam soundtrack, you couldn’t tell who was East or West.”<sup>54</sup> The magazine found East Berlin itself, as a location, shaped the sound of techno music and dictated the trends the scene developed due to the city’s historical significance. Techno culture became so popular in East Berlin, there became a market for it. That within itself shows how influential it was in Germany once the Berlin Wall came down.

Another German techno trend was the creation of rave culture and techno music festivals. The most famous of the techno raves is Love Parade. Established in 1989, Love Parade has come to be recognized as one of Europe’s largest music festivals in history.<sup>55</sup> It was started by Matthias Roeingh, also known as Dr. Motte, and Danielle de Picciotto. Their intentions were to have a techno demonstration that advocated for peace through music. “When the wall came down, an extraordinary festive period emerged in Berlin, which brought together creative talents from East and West Germany.”<sup>56</sup> The parade began in front of the Brandenburg Gate, which was not only historically significant for Germany but it was also economically important due to the amount of

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<sup>51</sup> George 2018

<sup>52</sup> George 2018

<sup>53</sup> George 2018

<sup>54</sup> George 2018

<sup>55</sup> Sandström

<sup>56</sup> Rietveld 2009

tourism it attracted.<sup>57</sup> “The parade drew masses of tourists, who also took part in the club events of the so- called “Berlin Love Week.”<sup>58</sup> Love Parade grew tremendously - “from 1989 when only 150 people participated, to 1990 with 3,000 participants. It reached its peak in 1999 with 1.5 *million* participants.”<sup>59</sup> When Dr. Motte was interviewed by Playful Magazine, he stated: ““Many people feel that Berlin and maybe the whole electronic music scene today, would have been completely different without the Love Parade. Some even say, that the parade helped Berlin and Germany, to finally overcome the bad image from the Nazi era and to be perceived as a new, colorful and cosmopolitan city, and even country.”<sup>60</sup> It was techno festivals, such as Love Parade that established the techno scene on a more international level.

If Love Parade is used as a case study to analyze rave culture in Berlin during the 1990s, it can be demonstrated that techno raves redefined the geographical history of Germany and contributed to the era of reunification. In an article published by UCLA, researcher Sean Nye discusses techno festivals in the context of its urban environment within Germany. Nye states: “the history of Berlin and the Love Parade is a history that sets many of the late-modern tensions regarding the social place of electronic dance music (EDM) and urban life in relief, touching on questions of agency, rebellion, authenticity, and the future of the counterculture.”<sup>61</sup> The Brandenburg Gate was constructed between 1788 and 1791 as a symbol of Prussian state power<sup>62</sup> and during the Cold War it became a contested site of a divided city. As Nye described it- Love Parade “exploited this history to allow it to be associated alternatively with all of these levels.”<sup>63</sup> Love Parade’s main goal was to emphasize the concept of internationalism and with its success it

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<sup>57</sup> Rietveld 2009

<sup>58</sup> Rietveld 2009

<sup>59</sup> Sandström

<sup>60</sup> Sandström

<sup>61</sup> Nye

<sup>62</sup> Nye

<sup>63</sup> Nye

ultimately became a symbol of Germany's new stature, and resulted in the parade becoming a pop symbol of German national unity.<sup>64</sup>

### **Change in techno music (1990s - 2000s)**

Although Love Parade remains to be the most legendary time period for techno music in Germany; the height of its existence soon came to an end in the 2000s. A documentary that scholars in the field often refer to is *We Call It Techno!* (2008), provides a German perspective on the development of electronic dance music through a series of interviews. It documents the rise and fall of techno raves, and ultimately focuses on Love Parade in order to explore the fall of the techno scene. After its peak in 1999, Love Parade began to change rapidly. In 2001, Love Parade lost its legal status as a political demonstration; which exacerbated the economic challenges of staging the parade.<sup>65</sup> “This status had guaranteed that the city of Berlin would pay for the security and the cleanup of the enormous waste left by the attendants.”<sup>66</sup> Without this status, Love Parade was unable to finance itself. This resulted in a decline in attendance, and Love Parade was officially canceled between the years of 2004 and 2005.<sup>67</sup> Despite its revival in 2005 it officially came to an end in 2010. According to an NPR article that was released during this time: “After 19 people were killed and over 500 injured during a stampede at the Love Parade, a dance music festival held in Western Germany, the Associated Press reported that organizers say the festival will never be held again.”<sup>68</sup>

### **Techno music in the 21st century (2010s - Today)**

Scholars have referred to the fall of Love Parade as the end to techno culture. However, this paper challenges this argument and pushes historians to view the 21st century as a time

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<sup>64</sup> Nye

<sup>65</sup> Nye

<sup>66</sup> Nye

<sup>67</sup> Nye

<sup>68</sup> Ganz 2010

period that normalized the genre and fully incorporated it into its socio-political environment. After 2010, most techno clubs had long-term rent contracts and were equipped with the latest sound systems.<sup>69</sup> A techno festival that began at the same time as Love Parade, called Mayday Parade, remains to exist today and continues to attract tourists from all around the world. Additionally, in 2016 the techno club Berghain was officially deemed a cultural institution. “As *Der Spiegel* reports, the club is now eligible to pay the lower rate of 7% following a landmark case that arose after being threatened by an increased 19% entertainment tax.”<sup>70</sup> Techno festivals globalized the scene for Germany and truly took it to new heights. It transported the feeling of liberation many people felt from an enclosed space underground club in East Berlin to the public, at some of the most well-known locations in Germany. With all of the advancements the scene made after 2010, it is unfair to label techno culture as dead. It has simply evolved with the reunification of the country and has become an official part of German national identity.

## **Conclusion**

Ultimately, I chose to write my honors thesis paper on techno music because of my own experience with the techno scene in Berlin. I was fortunate enough to study abroad in Germany the summer of 2022 at Freie Universität Berlin, and I experienced first-hand just how much of an impact the music genre had on the country. During my stay, I made many connections between Germany’s history and how techno music was expressed. Whether it be how much the genre influenced people before and after reunification, or the significance of the location of techno clubs themselves, and the internationalization of techno music through techno festivals- all aspects of its history point to the genre being a form of political activism. German techno music was quite literally birthed from the pain that came with living under Soviet rule. It allowed both

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<sup>69</sup> Rietveld 2009

<sup>70</sup> Whitehouse 2016

East and West Germans to communicate with each other and create the reunified country we know of today. This research proves how techno was a tool used to rebuild German society, and how it fostered a sense of German identity.

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