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## **The Hinge of History**

**By ROGER COHEN**

Ever since June 15 in Tehran I've been asking the most alluring and treacherous of historical questions: "What if?"

What if the vast protesting crowd of perhaps three million people had turned from Azadi (Freedom) Square toward the presidential complex? What if Mir Hussein Moussavi, the opposition leader, had stood before the throng and said, "Here I stand with you and here I will fall?" What, in short, if Azadi had been Prague's Wenceslas Square of 20 years ago and Moussavi had been Vaclav Havel?

In history, of course, the hypothetical has little value even if at any one moment — like that one in the Iranian capital three days after the disputed election — any number of outcomes was as plausible as what came to pass.

Retrospective determinism (Henri Bergson's phrase) now makes it hard to imagine anything other than the brutal clampdown that has pushed Iranian anger beneath the surface. Yet of course things might have ended differently.

In 1989, the revolutionary year, the Tiananmen Square massacre happened in Beijing and, five months later, the division of Europe ended with the fall of the Wall in Berlin. Could it have been otherwise? Might China have opened to greater democracy while European uprisings were shot down?

We cannot know any more than we know what lies on the road not taken or what a pregnant glance exchanged but never explored might have yielded.

All we know, as Timothy Garton Ash observes in *The New York Review of Books*, is, "The fact that Tiananmen happened in China is one of the reasons it did not happen in Europe."

And now those events of 20 years ago — Europe's 11/9 — are pored over by historians in search of definitive answers to how that world-changing moment transpired, and pored over by 21st-century repressive governments to ascertain wherein exactly lay the weakness (as they see it) of Mikhail Gorbachev, the man who would not open fire.

The history of 1989 is still being written — a plethora of new books testify to that. The history of Iran in 2009 will also be written many times over. Truth is elusive, but it's worth recalling that beyond the inexorable historical forces at work in moments of crisis, there often lies one person's decision in a particular confused moment.

The hinge of history hangs on a heartbeat.

Harald Jaeger is a good reminder of that. I first met him in Berlin a decade ago. He's the former officer in the East German border guards who, on the night of Nov. 9, 1989, opened the gate at Berlin's Bornholmer Strasse, ending the Cold War.

Now 66, Jaeger recently retired to a small town near Berlin where he cultivates his garden. When I saw him a few weeks ago, he was wearing a blue T-shirt and gold-rimmed spectacles: an ordinary-looking gray-haired guy with a frank gaze. He's not been invited to the elaborate 20th-anniversary celebrations but bears no rancor. "To put it in a nutshell," he told me, "It was a lucky moment."

I tried to imagine him at his post 20 years ago, facing a growing crowd, defending the border that had been his life, knowing that a senior official (Günter Schabowski) had just said East Germans could travel "without meeting special provisions," unable to get clear orders from his superior, wavering, alone.

Just after 11 P.M., he gave the order to open the gate. How did he feel? "Sweat was pouring down my neck and my legs were trembling. I knew what I had done. I knew immediately. That's it, I thought, East Germany is finished."

Jaeger had not set out to terminate a country. Behind him lay great forces: Pope John Paul II; Lech Walesa and the heroic Poles of Solidarity; Soviet economic collapse; Ronald Reagan's "tear down this wall;" Gorbachev's refusal to go the Tiananmen route; the irrepressible stirring of the myriad European souls imprisoned at Yalta.

Yet, despite all this (history's long arc), the event itself — the unimaginable event — still needed a single beleaguered officer to open a gate rather than open fire. A decade ago, Jaeger told me: "I did not free Europe. It was the crowd in front of me, and the hopeless confusion of my leadership, that opened those gates."

Having been in that Tehran crowd, I know the force was with it. I felt myself how fear evaporates with such numbers. Nobody, not in 2009, can slay millions. Behind those Iranians, too, lay greater forces, all Iran's centennial and unquenchable quest for some stable balance between representative government and religious faith.

The millions didn't want to overthrow the Islamic Republic; they just wanted the second word in that revolutionary name to mean something — enough, anyway, for their votes to count.

What if they had wheeled and borne down on the fissured heart of power in the instant of its disarray? What if this had been Iran's "lucky moment?"

I have no answer to my "what if?" but 1989 suggests this: One day the dam must break when a repressive regime and the society it rules march in opposite directions.

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