

The New Criterion

Features

November 2009

Tyranny set in stone

by [Roger Kimball](#)

Why we must not forget the lessons of the Berlin.

It is in the moment of defeat that the inherent weakness of totalitarian propaganda becomes visible. Without the force of the movement, its members cease at once to believe in the dogma for which yesterday they still were ready to sacrifice their lives.

—Hannah Arendt

The inevitable never happens. It is the unexpected always.

—John Maynard Keynes

Was there ever a more fitting monument to tyranny than the Berlin Wall? Conceived in desperation, this brutal barrier was erected in 1961 by the state not for the protection but for the incarceration of its citizens. Hold fast to that thought. The Berlin Wall was the stuff of gritty spy novels, the literal instantiation of Winston Churchill's "iron curtain," which in 1946, with characteristic prescience, he saw descending across Central and Eastern Europe. The Berlin Wall was also an inescapable indictment, not just of a particular society but of an entire world view, the world view of Soviet Communism with its rhetoric of justice and class struggle in one hand and its reality of the Gulag and the systematic obliteration of human freedom in the other.

Do we remember that? The passage of time tends to soften outlines, confuse oppositions, and swallow fundamental distinctions in a patois of complication. It is a process that promises greater understanding, or at least greater sophistication. Often, however, its chief fruit is an enervating, ultimately an endarkening, relativism. Although fragments of the Berlin Wall are distributed like talismans of freedom across the globe—fittingly, a large sliver stands outside the Reagan Library in California—its awful significance seems muted, even lost in the cacophony of historical second-guessing, the distorting glaze of nostalgia.

The story of the Berlin Wall is inseparable from the story of the peculiar disposition of Berlin following World War II. Thrust some 100 kilometers into the decidedly non-democratic German Democratic Republic, Berlin was nominally under the control of the four victorious allies, with France, Great Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union each presiding over a separate quadrant. In reality, the city, like Germany itself, was split between democracy in the West and Communist tyranny in the East. It was a situation that guaranteed the city would become a theater in which the democratic West would be in daily public contest with Soviet Communism.

From the very beginning, Berlin was a huge embarrassment for the Soviets. The worker's paradise of East Germany seemed the opposite of edenic to those condemned to live and work there. Contiguity with the West in Berlin assured that the discrepancy between life in a liberal democracy and a

Communist state was (like Falstaff's dishonesty) "gross as a mountain, open, palpable." In 1948, the Soviets blockaded Berlin, a preliminary, they hoped, to annexing it entirely. The Berlin airlift, orchestrated by the American army general Lucius Clay, provisioned the city with some 4,500 tons of food, fuel, and other necessities every day for nearly a year—at its peak, 1,500 flights a day were crowding in and out of Tempelhof airport. Finally, in May 1949, the Soviets gave it up and lifted the blockade.

The airlift was an extraordinary act of political defiance as well as an unprecedented logistical feat. But it did not overcome the contradiction that was Berlin. Increasingly, East Germans voted with their feet. By 1960, a thousand people a day were fleeing East Germany via Berlin. Walter Ulbricht, the GDR's Communist dictator, pleaded with Nikita Khrushchev to do something to stanch the flow of human capital. The following summer, Khrushchev, having taken the measure of JFK and his lieutenants, decided to close the border. At a dinner on August 12, he gleefully announced to his companions: "We're going to close Berlin. We'll just put up serpentine barbed wire and the West will stand there, like dumb sheep."

Work began at midnight. The Russian soldiers had been told to withdraw if challenged. But no challenge came from JFK's ovine entourage. In the succeeding months, the barbed wire was replaced by masonry and metal. The wall gradually encircled the whole of West Berlin. Some three-hundred guard towers punctuated the wall. A second, inner wall sprang up. The "death strip" between was mined and booby-trapped. Guard dogs accompanied the soldiers on their rounds. Erich Honecker, who replaced Ulbricht in 1971, issued a shoot-on-sight order. Somewhere between a hundred and two hundred people were killed trying to scale, or tunnel under, the wall, another 1,000 trying to flee elsewhere from East Germany. For Honecker, it was a small price to pay. Between 1949 and 1962, some two and a half million people had fled East Germany to the West. From 1962 to 1989, his draconian measures reduced the flood to a trickle of 5,000. "Overnight," Michael Meyer writes in *The Year That Changed the World*,

the forty-two thousand square miles of the German Democratic Republic became a prison. Transportation and communication links were cut. Bustling streets and lively sidewalks in the heart of metropolitan Berlin suddenly became abandoned dead ends. Sewers, tramlines and power grids were blocked or cut. Families were broken, friendships severed. Children lost parents or grandparents. On official maps, the Western half of the city was blotted out—figuratively erased from the world of the living. [1]

It all seems so long ago now—not just the construction of the wall and the long eclipse of freedom that followed, but also the brief carnivalesque season that attended its collapse nearly thirty years later on November 9, 1989. What had begun in studied malevolence ended in stunning inadvertence. By the mid-1980s, the monolith of Soviet tyranny was betraying cracks. Mikhail Gorbachev, who ascended to power in 1985, endeavored to save Communism through a policy of selective liberalization. There was no question of scrapping Communism. Gorbachev time and again made it clear that he was a committed Communist. He might contemplate certain economic and social reforms in order to salvage the USSR's corrupt and stagnant economy, but private property in any robust sense was out of the question. Similarly, there could be no serious rivals to the Communist party for political power.

Gorbachev had set himself an impossible task. As Hannah Arendt observed, the essence of totalitarianism lies in arbitrariness and control. Efforts to liberalize totalitarian regimes therefore lead not to reform but dissolution. Keeping the lid on freedom is like being a little bit pregnant: an impossibility. By 1989, cracks in the façade of Soviet totalitarianism had become so many fissures of freedom. The Tiananmen Square Massacre in China that June had the effect of galvanizing nascent movements for freedom across Eastern and Central Europe and even in Russia itself. Borders with

the West in Hungary and Czechoslovakia were breached and a new exodus to the West began. In one three-day period, 50,000 people fled. A common joke: “Last one out, turn off the lights.”

In East Germany, Erich Honecker was deposed by the Politburo in October. His successor, Egon Krenz, was a doctrinaire Communist desperate to salvage the regime and his career. With the Hungarian and Czech borders hemorrhaging people, he knew he had to address the issue of exit visas. He did not declare the Berlin Wall open. On the contrary, he said that the wall was “a bulwark against Western subversion.” He carefully drafted a plan that would allow East Germans with the appropriate papers to leave after applying to the authorities. The plan was to take effect the following day, November 10. He read the provisions aloud to his colleagues sentence by sentence to be sure that there was no misunderstanding. He then gave the document to his assistant Günter Schabowski, who was on his way to a press conference.

At the end of the press conference, Schabowski read from Krenz’s communiqué. The effect was electrifying. Schabowski had just announced that the East Germans would be free to go. In the hubbub that followed, the question “When does the decree take effect?” penetrated his ears.^[2] Schabowski paused to consult his notes. “*Ab sofort*” came the famous reply: “immediately.” Almost instantly, the wall was besieged by impatient throngs. The guards did nothing to stop them. Krenz’s plan for a state-controlled dispensation was shattered. And thus began the unraveling that would soon engulf not only Eastern Europe, but also the very seat of empire. In many ways, as Victor Sebestyen observes in *Revolution 1989: The Fall of the Soviet Empire* (Pantheon, 2009), it was “a mistake.” He quotes an unnamed diplomat who described the fall of the Berlin Wall as “one of the most colossal administrative errors in ... history.”

Although dramatic, was the fall of the wall really so important? After all, protests and freedom movements were springing up all across the Soviet empire. But Michael Meyer is right: if Krenz’s plan had been put into action as he wished, things might have been different:

The wall would not have “fallen.” It would have been opened, not breached. The communists would have done it, not the people. Change might have come by evolution, not revolution. The bureaucrats would have gained time. Might they even have contained or channeled popular unrest, defused it, convinced people that reformed communism could work, possibly even keep themselves in power? Without the drama of the Fall ... would the Velvet Revolution in Prague have come one week later? Would Romanians have found the courage to rise up against Ceausescu a month later? The dominos of Eastern Europe might have toppled differently. A few might not have toppled at all.

What, finally, brought down the wall? The candidates for that honor are many, from the impersonal operation of History to the people-power of movements like Solidarity and the spiritual leadership of Pope John Paul II. Among Western academics, the role of Mikhail Gorbachev enjoys pride of place. His mantras of *glasnost* and *perestroika* (“openness” and “restructuring”) became favored terms in English. In the late 1980s, Gorbachev, the true-believing Communist, was the hero. Never mind that he wished to salvage the Soviet empire: he spoke to the hearts and minds of the Western intelligentsia in a way Ronald Reagan never did. Reagan, after all, had the temerity early on in his tenure to describe the Soviet Union as an “evil empire.” How the liberal establishment recoiled from, how it ridiculed that phrase. “The Western diplomatic firmament,” William F. Buckley Jr. recalled in 1990, “shook with indignation.” Then came “Star Wars” and Reagan’s military buildup. How the Left scorned that. How the Soviets scrambled to keep up. After one of his chummy sight-seeing tours of Moscow in 1984, the Harvard economist John Kenneth Galbraith wrote an article about his trip for *The New Yorker*. The Soviet’s “great material progress” impressed him, as did the look of “solid well-being of the people on the streets.” He dismissed as groundless the rumors that were beginning to circulate that there was trouble in paradise. Although some

commentators had suggested that the Soviet Union was in crisis, even “in danger of collapse,” Galbraith brusquely dismissed such pessimism: “This I strongly doubt.”

Meanwhile, Ronald Reagan kept battling against the intolerable enormity of Communism. In 1987 in Berlin, he delivered one of his most famous speeches: “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!” The great line was written by Peter Robinson, now a scholar at the Hoover Institution. Both the State Department and the National Security Council attempted to get the line dropped from the speech. It was “naïve,” it would raise “false hopes,” it made Reagan look like “a crude anticommunist cowboy.” The speech went through seven drafts; each time, the line was excised; each time Reagan restored it. The Soviets were furious when Reagan delivered the speech. Well might they be. It was on his watch, as Buckley put it, that Communism “ceased to be a creed, surviving only as a threat.” “Ronald Reagan,” Buckley added, “had more to do with this than any other statesman in the world.”

The twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall provides an opportune moment to remind ourselves what was at stake in the Cold War—what still is at stake on the perpetual battleground of freedom. I know that sounds histrionic. But the fall of the Berlin Wall—the first act whose denouement was the collapse of the Soviet Union two years later—is a contemporary as well as a historical subject. That is to say, we have not written *finis* to that chapter of our moral history. It is not clear that we ever will. As Leszek Kolakowski, one of our greatest genealogists of Marxism, observed in 2002,

communism was not the crazy fantasy of a few fanatics, nor the result of human stupidity and baseness; it was a real, very real part of the history of the twentieth century, and we cannot understand this history of ours without understanding communism. We cannot get rid of this specter by saying it was just “human stupidity,” or “human corruptibility.” The specter is stronger than the spells we cast on it. It might come back to life.

As we look around the world today, a melancholy spectacle greets our gaze. The Soviet Union is no more, but a minatory if diminished Russia has taken its place. A possibly nuclear Iran. A confirmed nuclear North Korea and Pakistan. Preposterous anti-American strongmen like Hugo Chávez in Venezuela. An increasingly rampant threat of Islamofascism. The enemies of freedom and the West are more numerous than ever. It is here that the two deepest lessons of the Berlin Wall lie. First, that tyranny frankly confronted can be defeated. But, second, that the victory of freedom is never final: it must always be renewed not only through our willingness to acknowledge and struggle against evil, but also through a forthright proclamation of our own founding principles. It is this last requirement of freedom that seems most difficult for Western intellectuals. To quote Kolakowski once more, there is “one Great Cause that has persisted more or less intact throughout the past decades in the Leftist mentality: the loathing of democratic countries. Allegiances changed, but if there was something enduring in Leftist politics, it was this: in any conflict between a tyrannical and democratic country, the tyrants were right and democracy wrong.” One would have thought that the admonitory tale of the Berlin Wall would provide an incontrovertible disabusement. Alas, it is a lesson we have yet to absorb.

Notes

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1. *The Year That Changed the World*, by Michael Meyer; Scribner, 272 pages, \$26. [Go back to the text.](#)
2. There are varying accounts about who asked the fatal question. The top two candidates are the British historian Daniel Johnson and the American newsman Tom Brokaw. [Go back to the text.](#)

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This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 28 November 2009, on page 6

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