

The Ambush of History: The Fall of the Berlin Wall

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For those gazing across from the Western portion of graffiti crowded murals towards the lines of dogs, men, and steel, the Berlin Wall was a matter of habitual terror. It was also defiance – be it the system operating in the German Democratic Republic (DDR) intent on projecting this “bulwark against fascism” or the Federal Republic of West Germany, keen to remind the other Berliners that there was another political system across the barbed wire. Across the murderous partition, these systems gazed.

Then came November 9, 1989, and the words of the popular anchorman Hanns Friedrichs in West Germany: “This is a historic day. East Germany has announced that, starting immediately, its borders are open to everyone.”[1] It may well be that nothing is quite so formidable than an idea whose time has come. But there is also something to be said about an idea whose time has left. The exit signal is given, and then, walls crumble, ground gives in. The entire eastern bloc crumbled over a matter of months, a matter of sheer exhaustion. The baffled Western powers could barely believe their dumb luck.

The Soviet Union’s Mikhail Gorbachev’s refusal to cede to any wishes to use tanks to bring the protestors to order was fundamental. The Soviets stayed in their barracks even as the first parts of the wall started being removed. A shadow of this was already being cast in October 1985, when Gorbachev explained to his East European colleagues that the principle of responsibility had to be shouldered by states individually. 1956 and 1968 would not be repeated.

For a moment in time in 1989, even if it was the briefest of moments, the DDR suddenly seemed democratic. If nothing else, it was more representative even as the awnings were falling down. But the momentum of history was simply too powerful for the hope that a reformed German socialist republic might survive. Agents were corroding the edifice of the state.

The DDR was being readied for the funeral pyre, a social and political experiment that had been cruel in the name of justice; savage in the name of working freedoms. There was free healthcare, guaranteed employment, free education. But this came with limited mobility in travel (paradise was not to be exited), a muzzled press and a distinct lack of free speech. The planned economy was also a magical, ultimately mystical effort of control, needing barbed wire and a police apparatus so sophisticated, the webs of betrayal are still being patched together.

The end of the DDR, and indeed the fall of the Communist bloc, saw followers of the capitalist creed chortle in unmitigated joy. It saw, in Saskia Sassen’s words, “one of the most brutal economic phases of the modern era”, one of expansionist, bankster-fuelled capitalism that did, in its wisdom, gives us the collapse of 2008. No better view reflected this better than the observation by Clyde Prestowitz that three billion new capitalists – be

there producers and consumers – found themselves in a new global economy.[2]

Little wonder, then, that *Ostalgie* came into vogue, the reminiscing sentimentality of people casting their minds back to a time not so much where the Stasi ruled by terrifying intrusions, but where state care afforded women the means to continue work. That reflection tends to ignore the 136 who died in attempting to cross the wall into West Berlin. Political desperation and social submission rarely see eye to eye.

Such nostalgic harking also takes on peculiar, consumer forms, itself an ironic appropriation of communist symbols in the good name of profit. There are “Trabi Safaris” one can take from the wall’s Checkpoint Charlie – the Trabant having been the East German equivalent of the people’s car. Beware, warns the Berlin mayor, of turning the East German state into a cult like retreat of the mind. “We don’t have any tolerance for those who nostalgically distort the history of the Berlin Wall and Germany’s division,” an indignant Klaus Wowereit stated in 2011.

The greatest mocking irony of the fall of the wall lies in the message about those fanged forces marshalled against each other along the border. There was not a shot fired in anger even as the most sinister symbol of the Cold War began coming down. As Lucy Komisar would note in January 1990 in the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, “The first irony about the collapse of communism is that the Western military power has had nothing to do with it.” The participants in the unfolding drama had found themselves, in the words of the *Washington Post*, in “an ambush of history.”

The entire espionage apparatus that had targeted the DDR was found wanting – officials were getting their updates from twenty-hour news updates on CNN. All those weapons, and all those recruits, left behind by the motor of history.

And what of Germany after the fall of the wall? Twenty five years later, it is one “comfortable with the degree to which re-nationalisation and intergovernmentalism has taken over the EU,” argues Josef Janning.[3] Janning is critical – this is a different country, one “reluctant” in projecting its singular power at the centre of Europe, “shying away from both the risks and the costs of greater responsibility.” The Federal Republic, in 1989, had been a model citizen, one keen on the “community method” of European integration. Much of this was based on trundling out the cash reserves, placating smaller states, and engaging the good offices of the United Kingdom.

But Janning misses a fundamental point about this approach of Germany “leading from behind”: those who see German power do not see responsibility so much as danger. Historical shackles centred on the wielding of power, fictitious or otherwise, remain powerful. As do walls, which restrict movement, but also suggest the firming up of visions. What they are keeping out, and who they are keeping in, remain enduring questions.

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Notes

[1] <http://thebulletin.org/when-wall-fell7810>

[2] <http://www.blog.rielcano.org/en/global-spectator-1989-much-berlin-wall/>

[3] http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_germany_then_and_now343

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