

The Rise, Fall, and Legacy of the Berlin Wall

Democratic Party candidates for president advocate [socialism](#). Young adults view collectivism as a serious alternative to capitalism. Most anyone under 40 has little memory of the Berlin Wall, probably the most dramatic symbol of the most murderous human tyranny to afflict the world. After decades of oppression, hundreds of millions of people were finally free, which today we take for granted.

The Soviet Communist or [Bolshevik Revolution](#) was an accident of sorts, a tragic consequence of economic and social collapse resulting from World War I. Absent that conflict, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin probably would have lived out his life in Swiss exile spouting radical doctrines and playing chess. His later colleagues would have suffered obscurity in imperial prisons or exile. Russia's [Czar Nicholas](#) would have lived out his reign as his country prospered economically and reformed politically. Wilhelmine Germany, with a franchise broader than that of Great Britain, also would have seen a gradual shift in power toward liberal constitutional rule as Junker conservatism lost influence.

Alas, Europeans collectively jumped into the abyss of cataclysmic conflict, leading to a continent dominated by fascism, Nazism, and communism. The USSR concentrated its brutality on its own people until Adolf Hitler took control of Germany. The Fuhrer triggered the convulsion known as World War II, a conflict Hitler began but could not finish. In 1945, he committed suicide in the bunker of the ruined Reich chancellery. And the Soviet Union, led by [Joseph Stalin](#), occupied Berlin.

A Divided Germany

Germany was divided among the US, Great Britain, France, and USSR. The first three combined their zones into what became the Federal Republic of Germany in 1949. The Soviet zone became what was unofficially known in the West as the “sogenannt,” or the so-called German Democratic Republic (GDR). The four victorious powers occupied Germany’s capital, as well, which left West Berlin as an oasis of freedom in the middle of East Germany. In 1948, Moscow blocked land routes to Berlin, hoping to force out the allies; America refused to risk war by forcing passage, instead responding with the famed airlift. The following year, Stalin dropped the blockade, though relations remained tense.

The Soviets stripped “their” zone of productive assets and created a dictatorship in their image. Totalitarianism impoverished Germans spiritually as well as economically. The result was an exodus of people, especially younger, better-educated professionals. To help stem the human tide, East Germany’s Walter Ulbricht, with Stalin’s support, in 1952 turned Winston Churchill’s “[Iron Curtain](#)” image into a real, fortified border with the West. However, the GDR left Berlin’s internal border open. One reason was the fact that the East’s rail lines ran through the capital. The Ulbricht regime began to develop a rail network that avoided Berlin, which was only completed in 1961.

People and traffic moved freely between the two Berlins, which made defection easy. Worse, noted the Soviet ambassador to the GDR, [Mikhail Pervukhin](#),

the presence in Berlin of an open and essentially uncontrolled border between the socialist and capitalist worlds unwittingly prompts the population to make a comparison between both parts of the city, which unfortunately does not always turn out in favor of Democratic

[East] Berlin.

Actually, the comparison [never turned out in favor](#) of the communists. [Republikflucht](#), or “republic flight,” was a crime, but largely unenforceable. By 1961, an estimated 1,000 East Germans were fleeing every day. From 1949 to 1961, an estimated 3.5 million people, or fully one-fifth of the GDR’s citizens, had left. And the productive young were disproportionately represented among those heading West. The percentage of working-age people in the GDR’s population dropped from 71 percent to 61 percent by 1960.

If those trends continued, the GDR would cease to exist.

For some years, Ulbricht pressed the Soviets for permission to seal off Berlin, as well. USSR Communist General Secretary Nikita Khrushchev said no, apparently out of fear of the negative symbolism of walling in workers for whom the revolution supposedly had been won. However, the latter changed his mind in mid-1961, perhaps because he perceived US President John F. Kennedy, who had indicated he would not oppose construction of such a barrier, to be weak.

In any case, during the night of August 12, 1961, East German security personnel began constructing what became known as the Berlin Wall. Initially, streets were torn up and wire fences were strung, soon to be replaced with a brick wall, and then much more. The barrier got ever higher, more complex, and deadlier. Eventually, there were two walls with a death strip in between. The Berlin Wall had miles of concrete walls, wire mesh fencing, barbed wire, trained dogs, and anti-vehicle trenches. The boundary was supplemented with watchtowers, bunkers, and mines. Border guards were told to shoot those attempting to escape, the infamous “Schiessbefehl” order. The people’s paradise would kill its people to stop them from fleeing.

A Wall of Death

The wall did not stop human flight. Instead, it forced people to be more creative. East Germans climbed over, tunneled under, and flew over. They jumped from windows of buildings along the border – which later were demolished. GDR residents used balloons, built submarines, and created secret compartments in cars. An estimated 100,000 people tried to escape, and some 5,000 made it. Many of those who failed in their lunge for freedom paid a high price. Tens of thousands of East Germans were imprisoned for Republikflucht. Around 200 were killed – no one knows how many for sure – challenging the Berlin Wall. Include those murdered while attempting to cross the border elsewhere, and the death toll probably exceeded 1,000.

The first Berliner to die in an escape attempt was 58-year-old Ida Siekmann, who on August 22, 1961, jumped from a window in her building onto a West Berlin road (the area later was cleared and turned into a “death strip”). Two days later the first Berliner was murdered by the GDR authorities: 24-year-old tailor [Guenter Litfin](#) was shot while attempting to swim across the River Spree.

The true horror of a system that imprisoned an entire people was most dramatically illustrated almost a year later, on August 17, 1962, when East German border agents shot an 18-year-old bricklayer, [Peter Fechter](#), as he sought to surmount the wall. They left the conscious Fechter to bleed out in full view of residents in West Berlin. He was the 27th Berliner to die seeking freedom.

The carnage continued year in and year out, even as the Soviet Empire began to implode. The GDR government, at this point under ruthless hardliner Erich Honecker, continued to murder people who simply wanted to live free. On February 6, 1989, 20-year-old [Chris Gueffroy](#) became the last East German to be

murdered while fleeing. He worked in a restaurant but was about to be drafted into the army. He and his friend Christian Gaudian mistakenly thought the order to shoot had been lifted. While climbing the last fence along a canal, he was shot and killed. Gueffroy would have been 51 today.

Gaudian was injured, arrested, and sentenced to three years in prison. But he was released on bail in September 1989 and sent to West Berlin the following month. The four border guards who fired on Gueffroy and Gaudian received awards, but they, along with two Communist Party officials, were later tried in a reunited Germany (ultimately spending little or no time in prison).

One more Berliner was to die. An electrical engineer, 32-year-old Winfried Freudenberg, used a home-made balloon to flee. It crashed on March 8, killing him. By then communism was disintegrating in Poland and Hungary. When the latter began pulling down its border fence with Austria in May, the Iron Curtain had a huge hole. East Germans began flooding out.

Demonstrations erupted in the GDR, highlighted by people determined to stay and transform their country. Honecker reportedly wanted to shoot and requested Soviet intervention. [Mikhail Gorbachev](#) refused, and Honecker's colleagues retired him in October. But their tepid attempts at reform could not stem the freedom tsunami. On November 4, a million people marched in East Berlin demanding the end of communism.

On November 9, 1989, decades of oppression were symbolically swept away. There had been other moments of hope. The 1953 East German demonstrations, the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, and the 1968 Prague Spring. But all were crushed with various degrees of bloody brutality.

However, 1989 was different. And it was the [result of a mistake](#). The GDR decided to allow East Germans to apply for visas to travel. Politburo spokesman Guenter Schabowski missed

most of the critical meeting but was tasked with announcing the new policy to the international press. He indicated that people could travel now, "immediately, without delay." Crowds gathered at Berlin's crossing points as GDR border guards unsuccessfully sought guidance from above. Receiving none, they opened the gate after 10,316 brutal, sometimes murderous days.

The euphoria of that evening – with Berliners East and West heading west and east – was not the end of the GDR. But those powerful emotions heralded the regime's end. Nothing, including East German officials' desperate attempts to preserve their state and West European officials' furtive objections to Germany reunification, could stem popular demand to put the German Humpty Dumpty back together.

However, liberty was not fully restored until the rest of the Eastern European states defenestrated their communist regimes, including Romania, whose leader, [Nicolae Ceausescu](#), was a crackpot even by communist standards. He and his wife fled by helicopter when demonstrators they had gathered to harangue instead shouted him down. Their pilot observed: "They look as if they were fainting. They were white with terror."

On Christmas Eve, soldiers couldn't wait to start shooting to carry out the death sentence of a drumhead court-martial. Most important, the Soviet Union ultimately dissolved. Mikhail Gorbachev resigned Christmas Day 1991; the Soviet flag was lowered for the last time at midnight. On the 26th there was no more USSR.

After the Soviet Union

It is impossible to overstate the importance of that moment. There was a unique evil in Nazi Germany, with the attempted extermination of an entire people, a group long scapegoated and persecuted. However, communism's body count dwarfs that of fascism generally and Nazism specifically. [The Black Book of](#)

[Communism](#) estimated the death toll at more than 100 million. R.J. Rummel's figures in [Death by Government](#) are similar, though analysts vary in their figures for specific countries. And brutal repression, if not necessarily [mass murder](#), continues in Communist survivors China, Cuba, Laos, North Korea, and Vietnam.

Often the murder didn't even make logical sense. Rummel described Stalin's USSR:

[M]urder and arrest quotas did not work well. Where to find the "enemies of the people" they were to shoot was a particularly acute problem for the local NKVD, which had been diligent in uncovering "plots." They had to resort to shooting those arrested for the most minor civil crimes, those previously arrested and released, and even mothers and wives who appeared at NKVD headquarters for information about their arrested loved ones.

Surely this system was an Evil Empire, as President Ronald Reagan described it. On November 9, the Berlin Wall opened, never to close again. The European communist autocracies disappeared, though they found the transition to democratic capitalism to be more difficult than most analysts predicted and all hoped. Perhaps most tragic has been Russia's retreat into authoritarianism. Nevertheless, the collapse of communism was a magnificent triumph of the human spirit. The commitment to liberty defeated the lust for power.

There were many heroes in the fight for freedom. Some are famous, such as [Alexander Solzhenitsyn](#), the Soviet novelist who chronicled the horrors of the gulag, and [Lech Walesa](#), the Polish electrician who climbed atop a shipyard wall in Gdansk to challenge his country's rulers. Before them came [Imre Nagy](#) and [Pal Maleter](#), who led Hungarian revolutionaries and were executed by the Soviets and their local lackeys. Particularly important was Mikhail Gorbachev, a reform communist who

critically kept Soviet troops in their barracks throughout 1989.

And, of course, Ronald Reagan. He believed communism could be defeated. On June 12, 1987, he stood in front of Brandenburg Gate and issued his famous challenge:


General Secretary Gorbachev, if you seek peace, if you seek prosperity for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, if you seek liberalization: Come here to this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!

Most important, however, were the common folk across the continent who made the revolution. They resisted the [apparatchiks](#). They kept the dream alive. They demonstrated for change. They suffered in prison and sometimes were killed. They ultimately ended communism in country after country.

It has been three decades – the wall has been down longer than it was up – but we should continue to celebrate the fall of the Berlin Wall and end of the monstrously evil system behind it. The spirit of liberty survives today. There are additional freedom revolutions that should and must be staged in the future.

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