

Forbes

A Development In Berlin Threatens The Wall That Once Divided A Continent

By: Doug Bandow – March 11, 2013

As befits the capital of Europe's most prosperous nation, Berlin continues to grow. A new luxury condominium complex is planned along the Spree River. Alas, construction requires knocking down part of the original Berlin Wall.

The development would remove only a small section of the 1400 yards remaining, but emotions run high. Protestors have gathered and one demonstrator complained: "This is history, and it belongs to us Germans. The whole world knows this."

At least it should.

It is difficult to measure the human cost of communism. Nazism, with its genocidal attempt to eliminate an entire people, holds a special horror. But communism afflicted more nations and killed even more promiscuously. *The Black Book of Communism* numbers the murdered at more than 100 million. Communism continues to inflict varying levels of hardship, oppression, and death in the few remaining, though wavering, acolytes: China, Cuba, Laos, and Vietnam. Only North Korea remains pure, and completely murderous.

The Berlin Wall symbolized the horror of totalitarianism. What kind of a system imprisons its people? On June 12, 1987 Ronald Reagan stood in front of the Brandenburg Gate and said: "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!"

But Berlin's moment had not yet arrived. Even though Mikhail Gorbachev pushed glasnost and perestroika in the Soviet Union, what President Reagan had called the Evil Empire still loomed over Europe. When 1989 dawned communism obviously was exhausted, but few realized that the system was on its deathbed. Then the dominoes began to fall, starting with Hungary. Budapest's reform government tore down the border wall with Austria, freeing people throughout the Soviet bloc. Suddenly a vacation in Hungary meant asylum in the West.

East Germans who had suffered under Erich Honecker's decrepit Stalinist regime began fleeing through Hungary. When the Honecker government sought to close that window, East Germans filled the West German embassy in Prague, Czechoslovakia, demanding freedom.

Others began protesting at home against the misnamed German Democratic Republic. Honecker advocated shooting demonstrators if necessary, but his colleagues retired him instead and the protests exploded. On November 4 a million people gathered in East Berlin to demand freedom.

Five days later the desperate government opened the Wall. The GDR survived another year as a zombie state before reunification.

The other Eastern European communist regimes also collapsed that year. But the symbolic highlight of 1989 was the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Today very little remains of the roughly 100 miles of concrete fortification that surrounded West Berlin, which was located deep within the GDR. The rest of the border between West and East Germany also was fortified.

When Germany was divided Berlin became an escape hatch for the disaffected with occupation by the Soviets and later rule by Moscow's allies. By 1961 the best skilled and most ambitious East Germans were heading to Berlin, taking the subway into the Western zone, and traveling on to the Federal Republic of Germany. In 1960 199,181 East Germans fled to the FRG, 152,291 via West Berlin. Through August 12, 1961 another 155,402 escaped, 125,053 through West Berlin. The East German state feared collapse if it could not hold its most productive citizens.

On August 13, 1961 the GDR began constructing a wall to keep its people in. At first it wasn't hard to slip by or over the hastily placed barricades and barbed wire. One famous photo shows border guard Conrad Schumann, rifle casually slung on his shoulder, leaping over coils of barbed wire on Bernauer Strasse.

But over the next nearly three decades the regime relentlessly strengthened the barrier. The wall got wider and higher. Ditches, watchtowers, "death strips," and even automatic firing devices were added. The mini-me Stalinists in charge of the GDR were deadly serious: 957 East Germans are known to have been murdered attempting to escape their national prison. Roughly 200 of them died trying to flee into West Berlin. Thousands more were caught and imprisoned for "Republikflucht," or republic flight. If you've created a paradise-on-earth, it is only logical to punish the ungrateful ingrates who want to leave.

These dull statistics miss the full inhumanity of the GDR's policy. On August 22, 1961 the first would-be escapee died, 58-year-old Ida Siekmann, who jumped from her apartment onto the road below, which was in West Berlin. The East German authorities initially bricked up the windows and doors of adjoining buildings, but later demolished such structures to clear the border area.

Two days later the first East German was killed attempting to flee. Guenter Litfin, a 24-year-old tailor, was shot while swimming across the Spree River. West Germans could but watch helplessly as his body was pulled from the water.

One of the most poignant killings occurred a year later, on August 17, 1962. An 18-year-old bricklayer, Peter Fechter, was shot attempting to climb the wall at Zimmer Strasse,

near famed Checkpoint Charlie. He lay helpless, calling for help, for 50 minutes, bleeding to death before the shooters bestirred themselves.

However, the risk of death did not prevent people from seeking freedom. And continuing to pay the ultimate price.

Even with a reformer running the Kremlin, the GDR leadership remained obdurate. On February 6, 1989, two East Germans, believing the shoot-to-kill order had been lifted, attempted to escape. One was shot but survived and was imprisoned; 20-year-old Chris Gueffroy died in a ten-shot barrage. He was the last would-be escapee murdered by the GDR state. A month later, on March 8, Winfried Freudenberg, a 32-year-old electrical engineer, died when his home-made balloon crashed. He was the last East German known killed because of the Wall.

Although the tragedies remain with us, so should the victories. Over the years thousands of ingenious East Germans made it through, around, over, and under the Wall and other fortifications dividing the two Germanys. An industry arose in “Republikflucht,” with brokers making a profit by spiriting people to freedom.

Thankfully that entire evil system collapsed more than 23 years ago.

The Berlin Wall must be remembered. Whether that means saving every remaining yard of the original structure is up to Berliners. Ironically, there is a cost to liberty from blocking a project like the one at issue.

The Berlin Wall represents the worst of humanity. East Germans’ battle against the Wall represents the best. The fall of the Wall should give us hope as we face challenges in coming years. The spirit of liberty can be suppressed for a time. But it eventually always seems to triumph.