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#### Commentary

## Celebrate fall of Wall, freedom every day

Doug Bandow

On Nov. 9, 1989, the Berlin Wall, the most dramatic symbol of the most grotesque human tyranny ever to plague the globe, was opened. Free, free at last, shouted residents of half a continent and beyond. So dramatic was the ensuing revolution that it is easy today to forget that communism ever existed -- or at least what it really meant. Decades of totalitarian oppression were swept away in an instant. What may be the most important liberating moment in human history should give us hope even if we are tempted to despair about the future of our own nation and of Western civilization.

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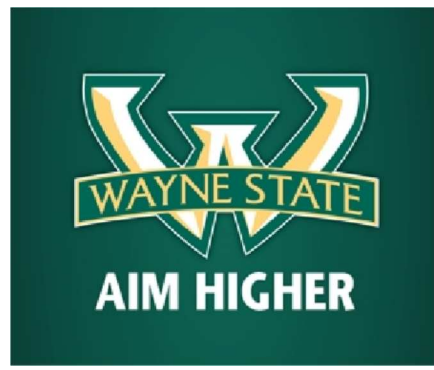


Communism was unmatched in its endless slaughter, killing more than 100 million. It impoverished spiritually as well as economically. Yet what seems inevitable today was not obviously so in 1989. Liberty had always ended up stillborn in the Soviet empire. But 1989 proved to be different. In Poland the communist leadership organized free elections -- which it promptly lost. Hungary tore down its wall with Austria, allowing East Germans to escape their country through Hungary and on to the West. Demonstrations engulfed the so-called German Democratic Republic, forcing the Communist Party to retreat. On Nov. 9 the regime opened the Wall, never to be closed again. Within a year a regime distinguished mainly by its willingness to shoot desperate people seeking freedom disappeared. Revolution erupted even in Romania, unseating the monstrous Ceausescus. Eventually even the Soviet Union disappeared. The collapse of communism remains a fantastic triumph of the human spirit. With minimal bloodshed, average people overthrew a gaggle of tyrannies; the desire for liberty trounced the lust for power. There were heroes in all of the communist countries. Average people willing to speak out, demonstrate, and demand their rights as human beings. Some heroes stand out. Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, the Soviet novelist who chronicled the horrors of the gulag. Lech Walesa, the electrician who climbed atop a shipyard wall in Gdansk, Poland, to declare that the time of repression was over. Pope John Paul II, who told his Polish countrymen to fear not. The playwright Vaclav Havel, who called the Czech regime to account for its crimes. Imre Pozsgay, who broke with his Hungarian Poliburo colleagues to call the 1956 uprising a "popular revolt."

Even more important was Mikhail Gorbachev. He was a reform communist, but he kept the Soviet troops in their barracks, leaving Eastern European apparatchiks to stand alone.

Finally, there was Ronald Reagan. He understood the real nature of communism, that it truly was an "Evil Empire." He also believed that communism could be defeated and tossed into the dustbin of history.

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On June 12, 1987, he stood in front of the Brandenburg Gate and said: "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" Another 29 months would pass, and Ronald Reagan would leave office, but the Brandenburg Gate did open.

Today it is almost as if the Wall never existed. Only a few small sections remain. The structure continually grew more deadly, yet several thousand people made it over, under, or around the Wall and the border fortifications lining the rest of the border between the two Germanys.

Alas, tens of thousands of East Germans were caught and imprisoned for "Republikflucht" -- attempting to flee the workers paradise. Worse, roughly 1,000 people were murdered attempting to escape their national prison.

The first person to die was 58-year-old Ida Siekmann, who jumped from her building to the bordering road in West Berlin on Aug. 22, 1961. Two days later a 24-year-old tailor, Guenter Litfin, became the first to be shot and killed -- while attempting to swim the River Spree.

On Feb. 6, 1989, 20-year-old Chris Gueffroy was the last East German to be murdered while seeking liberty. He was shot 10 times. On March 8, 32-year-old Winfried Freudenberg, an electrical engineer, became the last person to die in an escape attempt, when his home-made balloon crashed.

The fall of the Wall, and the evil system behind it, deserves to be celebrated. Not just on Nov. 9. But every day.

Two decades later much remains to be done by those who love liberty. Abroad tyranny remains. At home liberty also is threatened, though not as dramatically. The expansive welfare rather than the brutal authoritarian state is on the march.

Yet hope remains. Two decades ago what had only seemed to be a faint dream became a reality. The Berlin Wall fell. Communism disappeared. Hundreds of millions of people became free.

The spirit of liberty remains. Sometimes deeply buried. But the spirit of liberty remains.

*Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute.*

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