



Who really tore down the Berlin Wall?

November 7, 2014

By Christopher A. Preble

Twenty-five years ago this week, the world watched as the Berlin Wall, one of the most enduring symbols of the Cold War, came down.

American mythology often credits Ronald Reagan with the Wall's collapse, as if its concrete crumbled under the shattering power of his rhetoric. During Reagan's speech at the Brandenburg Gate, he famously implored, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!"

The reality in the autumn of 1989 was more complicated. The speech had occurred more than two years earlier, and the Wall wasn't actually Gorbachev's to tear down.

The East German government had no plans to do so. And yet the Wall fell. In [*The Collapse: The Accidental Opening of the Berlin Wall*](#), Mary Elise Sarotte tells the story of who actually did the deed, and why. It is a story of courage and persistence in the face of a brutal police state, with a dash of bureaucratic incompetence thrown in for good measure.

I think President Reagan would approve.

Pressure from the outside helped to break open Eastern Europe, to be sure. It is true, for example, that international institutions such as the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, and its Helsinki Final Act of 1975, had set the stage for a slow but inexorable expansion of human rights behind the Iron Curtain in the late 1970s and into the 1980s. Gorbachev then pushed through a number of reforms in his own country, and those reforms had been copied in a few Warsaw Pact countries.

Meanwhile, other Western leaders, including West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, and his Foreign Minister Hans-Deitrich Genscher of the Liberal Party (FDP), had sought practical ways to allow more East Germans to emigrate to the West.

Still, it was not inevitable that the Wall would come down in the autumn of 1989. Not all Soviet satellites were happy with Gorbachev's glasnost, and several were determined to resist – with violence, if necessary.

Chief among the skeptics was the venal Erich Honecker, who had governed the people's paradise of East Germany for nearly two decades. Honecker drew inspiration not from Gorbachev's

openness to reform but from the Chinese Communist Party's brutal crackdown against protesters in Beijing's Tiananmen Square in June 1989.

Honecker's handpicked successor, Egon Krenz, seized upon the growing unrest in October 1989 – especially a march in the Saxon city of Leipzig that drew over 100,000 protesters – to execute a putsch against the doddering septuagenarian. But when the ruling party announced Honecker's "resignation" and named Krenz in his place, East Germans had not forgotten Krenz's deep involvement in a fraudulent election in May and praise of China's Tiananmen massacre. In the end, Krenz proved no more conciliatory than his predecessor; his public rhetoric belied his private intransigence.

As the regime was breaking apart at the top, beset by petty rivalries and back-biting, its liberal opponents were becoming more united. The ubiquitous East German surveillance state – Sarotte concludes that the Ministry of State Security, aka the Stasi, "was the largest surveillance organization in recorded history" – no longer deterred the reformers. The opposition grew based on trust, of people whom they barely knew or had never even met, to spread information about protests within East Germany and to publicize the growing unrest outside of it.

East German churches helped, too. Hans-Jürgen Sievers, a 46-year old minister in Leipzig's Reformed Church, implored protesters to follow the American civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr.'s example. The Nikolai Church sported yellow banners that advised "leave the stones on the ground." It worked. The Leipzig protests remained non-violent. And fear of international reaction stifled a Tiananmen-style response by the regime.

It attempted instead to allow for greater cross-border travel, a process that had begun earlier in the year, but never in sufficient numbers to satisfy all of those who wanted to leave the dreary police state.

Krenz and his cronies never intended to open the borders permanently, and most certainly did not anticipate tearing down the Wall. They hoped to allow the opposition to blow off some steam, and thus drain the energy from the protests.

The ham-fisted effort was doomed from the start. When East German Politburo member Günter Schabowski botched the announcement of the new policy during a late afternoon press conference – he never explained, for example, that all emigration still had to be approved by the state – others seized upon the oversight.

After watching a video replay of Schabowski's press conference from a building that overlooked the Wall, West Berlin's Mayor Walter Momper decided to be guided by just two words: "as if." He would simply act as if the Wall were open.

Protesters who assembled at the Wall within minutes of the end of Schabowski's press conference did the same, facing down incredulous border guards and refusing to leave. Just before midnight, Harald Jäger, the senior officer in charge of the border crossing at Bornholmer Street, defied his orders and directed his staff to open the main gate.

Within minutes, news spread up and down the Wall. And since the Brandenburg Gate didn't have a formal border crossing, protesters there simply started climbing over. The East German government tried to re-impose control the following day, but could not. People had already begun chipping off pieces as souvenirs. Sarotte estimates that as many as three million East Germans visited West Berlin and West Germany in just three days.

The fall of the Wall was an accident: dreamt of by freedom-loving peoples both within and without Eastern Europe, but most emphatically resisted by those determined to stop it. This shouldn't diminish Reagan's contribution to the end of the Cold War, so much as to remind us that when we focus too much attention on an American president living safely thousands of miles away, we can miss the heroism and commitment of those who defied Communist authorities face to face.

They risked much and effected one of the greatest political changes in human history. Reagan would likely be the first to say they deserve their place in the spotlight.

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