

FREEDOM WATCH

The Spirit of 1989

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Only yesterday, it seems, decades of oppression disappeared overnight. On November 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 totalitarianism impoverished people spiritually as well as economically. Those decades of oppression were swept away in an instant. What may be the most important liberating moment in human history should give us hope even as we despair about the future of our own nation and of Western civilization.

Communism's body count dwarfs that of fascism and Nazism. The latter was uniquely monstrous in its attempt to eradicate an entire people. But communism was unmatched in its endless slaughter. *The Black Book of Communism*, written by several European intellectuals -- attacked for their effrontery in criticizing Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong, and other well-meaning mass murderers -- estimated the death toll at more than 100 million. And the killings continue in such communist hell-holes as North Korea.

Today the former communist states range from robustly democratic to unpleasantly authoritarian. However, all have moved light years beyond what President Ronald Reagan so accurately termed the Evil Empire. Freedom now is widely viewed as the normal human condition.

What seems inevitable today was not obviously so in 1989, however. As the year dawned, the Soviet bloc was stirring. In Russia Mikhail Gorbachev had unleashed perestroika and glasnost; several satellite regimes were trembling.

Still, liberty had always seemed to end up stillborn in the Soviet empire. Somewhat less thuggish apparatchiks, not cosmopolitan liberals, replaced brutal murderers in the USSR. The 1953 East German demonstrations, the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, and the 1968 Prague Spring were all summarily crushed. Poland's Solidarity movement was suppressed in the dead of cold night in December 1981.

But 1989 was different.

Hungary led the way. The man who betrayed his colleagues in 1956, Janos Kadar, had been deposed the previous year. The murdered revolutionary leaders, most notably Imre Nagy, were reburied. Plans for multiparty elections were announced. The Communist Party was dissolved.

In Poland the Solidarity union stirred anew and the communist leadership retreated. The regime was foolish enough to hold free elections -- which it lost, dramatically.

Hungary tore down its wall with Austria. It didn't matter so much to Hungarians, who already had been allowed to travel. But Budapest's action freed everyone else in Eastern Europe, who had been allowed to vacation within the Soviet bloc. In particular, East Germans began streaming out of their country and then through Hungary. Others fled to the West German embassy in Prague, Czechoslovakia. The human flood destabilized East Germany, the formerly bedrock Soviet satellite that trailed only Nicolae Ceausescu's Romania as Eastern Europe's most rigid and authoritarian regime.

Demonstrations first occurred in the so-called German Democratic Republic during the spring over yet another predictably fraudulent election. By the fall there were weekly marches in Leipzig: The GDR leadership temporized, causing the number of protesters to multiply. Communist Party boss Erich Honecker wanted to shoot them; rather than commit mass murder, the Politburo dumped Honecker. On November 4 a million people gathered in Alexanderplatz in East Berlin to demand the end of communism.

On November 9 the regime opened the Wall. In fact, the desperate communist leadership had decided only to relax travel restrictions, but Politburo member and spokesman Guenter Schabowski misunderstood his colleagues' decision and announced at a press conference that the border was opening at that moment. Tens of thousands of people gathered at still closed checkpoints, causing befuddled border guards to stand aside. The Berlin Wall was open, never to be closed again. Within a year the ugly, brutish regime, which had distinguished itself by shooting desperate people seeking to escape to freedom, disappeared.

The other European communist autocracies fell as well. Bulgaria dumped its ruler of 35 years, Todor Zhivkov. The tottering Czech regime yielded power in the so-called "Velvet Revolution." A mixture of popular demonstrations and military revolt unseated the monstrous Ceausescu in Romania. As revolution erupted they fled by helicopter. Their pilot observed: "They look as if they were fainting. They were white with terror." On Christmas Eve they were executed after a drumhead court martial.

The newly free countries have been bedeviled by problems. Of most concern is Russia's retreat towards authoritarianism. Nevertheless, the collapse of communism remains a fantastic triumph of the human spirit. With minimal bloodshed, average people overthrew a gaggle of tyrannies. What some thought to be impossible became real, as the desire for liberty trounced the desire 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. Average people willing to say no to the apparatchiks who had so long lived off the workers they were supposed to represent.

Some stand out. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the Soviet novelist who chronicled the horrors of the gulag and stripped the Soviet regime of any claim to legitimacy. Dissidents like Andrei Sakharov, who was banished internally after protesting Soviet man's inhumanity to man.

Lech Walesa, the electrician who nearly a decade before the Wall's collapse famously hopped over a shipyard fence in Gdansk, Poland, to declare that the time of repression was over. The forces of reaction reasserted themselves martial law in late 1981, but nine years later Walesa was elected president of Poland.

In Czechoslovakia there was Alexander Dubcek, who attempted to give communism a human face. The playwright, and first president, Vaclav Havel, called the regime to account for its crimes. Current President Vaclav Klaus engineered his nation's adoption of market economics as well as peaceful split between the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

More than four decades ago Imre Nagy, Pal Maleter, and thousands of Hungarian revolutionaries demanded freedom and were murdered by the Soviets and their Hungarian stooges. In 1989 Imre Pozsgay broke with his Poliburo colleagues, calling the earlier uprising a "popular revolt." He also pushed to tear down Hungary's wall with Austria.

Even more important was Mikhail Gorbachev. He was, of course, a reform communist, not a Western-style democrat. His crackdown in the Baltic states left blood on his hands.

Nevertheless, he was the necessary transition from communist totalitarianism to everything else. His decision to loosen the repressive bonds in the Soviet Union was heroic: events spun out of his control, but he was willing to pay that price in order to humanize the most murderous political regime in human history.

Equally important was his decision to keep the Soviet troops in their barracks throughout Eastern Europe. Moscow had ruthlessly crushed all previous attempts by subject peoples to lessen, let alone eliminate, communist repression. In 1989, however, Gorbachev let Eastern European communist leaders stand alone. They could not count on the loyalty of their own militaries. Nor could they depend on Soviet aid. In every country but Romania the ruling elites blinked. In the latter they lost anyway.

Finally, there was Ronald Reagan. He understood what communism was about, that it truly was an "Evil Empire." But he also believed that communism could be defeated, that the most ruthless totalitarian system ever created could be tossed into the dustbin of history.

On June 12, 1987 he 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!"

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 of the massive concrete structure that ran roughly 100 miles around West Berlin, a free island deep within the Evil Empire. Yet it is a testament to man's inhumanity to man which we can ill afford to forget.

The "wall" started out as barbed wire along streets, followed by brick walls. The structure grew more fearsome over time, mixing concrete walls, wire mesh fencing, watch towers, and anti-vehicle trenches. Yet several thousand people made it over, under, or around the Wall and border fortifications lining the rest of the border between the two Germanys. Human ingenuity knows few bounds when people are seeking freedom.

Alas, far more people failed in their attempt to be free. Tens of thousands of East Germans were imprisoned for "Republikflucht," or attempting to flee the East German paradise. Worse, roughly 1,000 people were murdered attempting to escape East Germany, some 200 from Berlin.

The first person to die while attempting to escape was 58-year-old Ida Siekmann, who jumped from her building to the bordering road in West Berlin on August 22, 1961 (the structure was later demolished to create a "death strip"). Two days later a 24-year-old tailor, Guenter Litfin, was shot and killed while attempting to swim the River Spree.

A year later an 18-year-old bricklayer, Peter Fechter, was shot and left to bleed to death in the death strip near Checkpoint Charlie within full view of residents in West Berlin -- who could do nothing for him. On February 6, 1989, 20-year-old Chris Gueffroy became the last East German to be murdered while seeking to escape his national prison. He and a friend thought the order to shoot had been lifted; he was hit ten times and died on the spot. His friend was injured but survived -- to spend time in prison. 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 November 9. But every day.

Two decades later much remains to be done by those who love liberty. Abroad tyranny remains: North Korea's odious dictatorship brutalizes and starves its people, the Castros' dictatorship remains in power a half century after the Cuban revolution, and China has reformed its economy, not its political system. Russia is retrogressing, while in some Eastern European states economic reforms have stalled, political systems have deadlocked, and communist crimes remain unpunished.

At home liberty is threatened, though not as dramatically. The expansive welfare state rather than the brutal authoritarian state is on the march, threatening to consume the

health care system. While spending wildly on bailouts, pork, and everything in between, Congress is considering a massive energy tax, which would devastate the private economy. Our society seems set to become both less free and less prosperous.

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 subjects of the Soviet empire became free.

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

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