

The Fall Of The Berlin Wall: The Wider Historical Context

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The Fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of Communism in Europe was probably inevitable, given the inability of the Communist system to compete economically with the West. We now hear that communism was 'unsustainable' and I largely agree, but at the same time I don't think it was inevitable that the Berlin Wall fell in 1989 or that the revolutions of that year were peaceful.

Observation 1: It could have happened later, and uglier

That the Cold War ended in 1989 was unthinkable to many experts. I recall an international relations professor acquaintance once told me that on the eve of the Berlin Wall's fall, he was in his hotel room preparing a presentation titled 'The Cold War: The Next 10 Years' for a conference. I was surprised that he would admit this. So, one lesson is that political change can happen surprisingly quickly in even the most entrenched regimes.

Also surprising to many was that the millions of Soviet and national army troops in Eastern Europe took virtually no action against demonstrators (with the main exception of Romania). Yet with so many men under arms, there could easily have been Tiananmen Squares in Berlin, Prague, Budapest, Warsaw, etc. However, by 1989, the regimes had lost so much legitimacy that the use of force was arguably no longer an option. There also comes a point when military leaders realise that the status quo is no longer worth defending.

Observation 2: We were lucky to survive 1983!

There were several major scares that could have led to a global war in 1983. US President Ronald Reagan had upped his rhetoric, calling the Soviet Union an 'Evil Empire' (although somewhat casually) and Moscow 'the focus of evil in the modern world'. He had also announced 'Star Wars' SDI and the deployment of new Pershing missiles to Europe. The Soviet leadership thought a major NATO military exercise, Able Archer, was a preparation for a strike on the USSR. There was also the shooting down of Korean Airlines 007 near Soviet Far Eastern territory on August 31, with the loss of 269 lives (the Kremlin suspected the plane was being used in a spy mission.) All these raised superpower tensions to their highest level since the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962.

Observation 3: Do individuals make a difference or are they carried by history?

A major question is whether the end of the Cold War happened because of the sheer personalities of Mikhail Gorbachev, Ronald Reagan, Pope John Paul II, etc. For example, Gorbachev might not have been chosen as Soviet leader in 1985. What if a hardliner had been chosen? And what if Jimmy Carter had been re-elected in 1980, with Walter Mondale succeeding him in 1985? And what if a non-Polish pope (presumably one far less committed to liberating Poland in particular and Eastern Europe in general) had been chosen in 1978? It is quite possible that 1989 would have turned out quite differently with alternative incumbents in the White House, Kremlin, and Vatican.

Or would it? Could it not be argued that the US had no choice but to elect Reagan in 1980, and the USSR had no choice but to choose a reformer in 1985? In other words, were Reagan and Gorbachev manifestations of the prevailing currents, rather than the source of them?

Observation 4: 1989 was about more than just Europe.

Although I have been discussing the Fall of the Berlin Wall as a European event, 1989 was significant in other ways, some good, some bad.

That year also saw the first fully-free elections in Brazil and Chile after many years of military or military-backed rule. These were major events in the democratisation of Latin America.

June 1989 saw the death of Iran's revolutionary leader, Ayatollah Khomeini. His death might have been an occasion for political liberalisation, but instead Iran remained under the control of religious hardliners.

June 1989 also saw the Tiananmen Square massacre in China. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership took the opposite decision to Gorbachev and are thus still in power today, although they can boast a far better economic track record.

December 1989 saw Japan's Nikkei index peak at 39,000, marking the end of the Japanese bubble and Japan's post-war ascent. Japan has yet to fully recover from this.

Observation 5: Not everyone was better off after the Cold War.

In the initial years following the collapse of Communism, Eastern European nations underwent tremendous hardships, with GDP falling substantially. The relative prosperity in Emerging Europe (prior to the global recession of 2008-09) took many years to achieve. Many other countries with communist, quasi-communist or USSR-backed regimes experienced civil war, leaving millions of people worse off (think Yugoslavia, Somalia).

Observation 6: Communism did not entirely die.

China, Vietnam, North Korea, Cuba, and Laos all retain Communist leaderships, although in the former two countries the free market has largely prevailed. Many of the 'Communists' in Eastern Europe merely changed their names to 'social democrats' and returned to power, albeit in reconstructed form. Overall, the phenomenon of significant state interventionism in economies lives on long after 1989, and may have increased with the global credit crunch.

Observation 7: Much of today's world was shaped more by 1979 than 1989.

Although 1989 was important, I would argue that 1979 arguably set the scene for 1989 by creating the desire for a stronger US president and dragging the USSR into a losing war in Afghanistan. Consider the following events:

The fall of the Shah of Iran in January, and the emergence of a vigorously anti-Western regime.

The election of Margaret Thatcher in May 1979 and the rise of neoliberal economics. (At the same time, China's Deng Xiaoping was setting his country on the path of free-market reforms.)

The official transfer of power to Saddam Hussein in Iraq in July 1979, and all the subsequent events that this led to.

The siege at the US Embassy in Tehran from November 1979 until January 1981 that sealed Jimmy Carter's fate, helping Reagan to be elected president.

The seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by radical Muslims and their swift elimination by the Saudi authorities.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December, five months after the US set in motion a plan to destabilise the country, and the Afghan war we still have today.

Overall, plenty of food for thought.