

The Berlin Wall Ten Years Later

by: [Steven Hayward](#)

Ten years ago this week the Berlin Wall started to come down, and it was immediately evident that the Communist empire would come down with it. A few years before the Berlin Wall went up in 1961, the Russian writer Ilya Ehrenburg offered what would become a fitting epitaph for Communist tyranny: “If the whole world were to be covered with asphalt, one day a crack would appear in that asphalt; and in that crack, grass would grow.” The crack in the Wall in 1989 proved to be the fatal fissure.

When President Ronald Reagan went to Berlin in 1987 and said “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall” (a line his foreign policy advisers tried several times to delete from his speech), most observers thought, “There he goes again.” Reagan had predicted back in 1983 that it would be Communism, not western democracy, that would end up on the ash heap of history. Almost no one thought the beginning of the end would come before the decade was over. How did Reagan know?

One other modern statesman predicted the demise of Communism before the century’s end—Winston Churchill. In the mid-1950s, when Churchill was Prime Minister for the second time, he told a young aide that if he lived his normal span of life he would surely see Eastern Europe free from Communism. How did Churchill know?

Reagan and Churchill came their assurance about the fate of Communism by the simple recognition that a social system so wholly unnatural could not long endure, even with the powerful scientific props of modern tyranny. The Berlin Wall was the ultimate artifact of this unnatural system: unlike the Great Wall of China or other bastions, the Berlin Wall was the first bulwark intended to keep people *in* instead of *out*. Reagan had noticed the significance of this back in the early 1960s, and his resolve was bolstered by a visit he made to East Berlin before he was president, during which, his traveling companions said, Reagan shook with rage at the tyranny he saw first hand. He resolved that “We must do something to free these people.”

As Churchill contemplated at the end of World War II the division of Europe that would necessarily come with Soviet occupation of the East, he remarked to Charles de Gaulle that while the Soviets were a hungry wolf now, “after the meal come the digestion period,” and that the Soviet Union would not be able to digest the peoples of Eastern Europe. Sure enough, every few years, like a burp of indigestion, a part of Eastern Europe would flare up and require to be put down forcibly—Hungary in 1956; Czechoslovakia in 1968; Poland in 1981.

By early 1989 it was time for another period of Eastern European indigestion. It was no longer possible for the Soviet Union to check the desire of Eastern Europeans to be free. A military crackdown would have made a hash of Gorbachev’s program of *glasnost* (“openness”) and *perestroika* (“restructuring”) and ruined Soviet-American relations at a crucial time.

The beginning of the end started in Hungary. After Solidarity had swept an election in Poland, reformers within the Hungarian ruling Communist party pushed for a genuine multi-party election there as well. A divided Communist party was unable to blunt the momentum for a process that it knew was likely to be its death sentence. But reformers knew that they faced great hazards during the transitional phase, and they feared that another 1956-style military crackdown might be in store, perhaps from East Germany (whose Stalinist leadership never did sympathize with Gorbachev's program) if not the Soviet Union.

So the Hungarians decided on a bold stroke. They opened their border with Austria, and stopped detaining East Germans who transited through Hungary en route to Austria. A back door around the Berlin Wall had opened up, and thousands were pouring through. The Hungarians did not inform the Soviet Union or East Germany in advance. "We were pretty sure," Hungarian reformer Imre Pozsgay said later, "that if hundreds of thousands of East Germans went to the West, the East German regime would fall, and in that case Czechoslovakia was also out."

They were right. Throughout the fall protests in East German cities were growing, reaching a climax on November 4, when a million people took to the streets of East Berlin. East Germany's aging tyrant, Erich Honecker, had stepped down in October, but it was too late. His successors bowed to the inevitable on November 9, and announced the opening of the borders to the West. Within hours thousands of Germans from both sides of the Berlin divide descended on the Wall with picks and hammers. "We did not suspect," the East German foreign minister wrote, "that the opening of the Wall was the beginning of the end of the Republic." He was clearly oblivious to Ehrenburg's prophecy that once a blade of grass poked through the concrete, the Wall would come tumbling down.

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German Chancellor Helmut Kohl:

It was in Hungary where "the first stone was removed from the Berlin Wall," then-German Chancellor Helmut Kohl reminded his fellow Germans when he spoke in Berlin on Oct. 4, 1990, the day after German reunification. And Hungary is still home today to the secret facilitators and quiet heroes who probably gave the regime of East German leader Erich Honecker the decisive push by opening the gates to the West for tens of thousands of East German refugees.