

Walls Between Minds

Dr. Ashok V. Desai

It is 20 years since the fall of the Berlin wall, the cataclysmic event that changed the face of Europe, and 50 years since I first went to Germany. I studied in Kiel in the early 1960s; the scars of defeat and division were then still etched on the landscape and on the minds of Germans. I remember visiting Berlin soon after the wall was erected. The wall was only for Germans; it did not stop foreigners like me. I had gone with an American friend; we drove past the checkpoint. There was little traffic – not even many Trabis around. We parked the car close to Checkpoint Charlie and went for a stroll. When we came back to the car, we found a Volkspolizist keeping watch on the car. The Kiel number plate made the car suspicious.

The Autobahn from Hanover to Berlin was equally effectively sealed off. It, in theory, belonged to the western allies, but even an inch beyond it was foreign territory. There were a couple of locations along the way where one could stop, but otherwise one was not even allowed to stop and relieve oneself.

At that time I remember thinking, how impractical all this is! The East Germans would have to build hundreds of miles of wall; in Berlin itself they built over a hundred miles of it, twelve feet high. And yet it could be scaled or breached at any place. So they would have to build enough watchtowers to keep an eye on every yard of the wall, and man them with thousands of soldiers. It was always possible that a guard may go to sleep – or over the wall. So he had to be provided with a companion to keep watch over him. The border went over mountains and across forests; so a broad swathe of land had to be cleared all the way along it. Anyone who was intent on escaping would study the location of watchtowers and find a place where he could evade detection. So mobile patrols had to keep driving along the border all the time. Jail was not enough to deter many who wanted to leave; so they had to be shot. Such were the consequences of the logic of division.

Yet there are many borders across the world; only a few of them have walls or fences. Some of them are not even marked; for example, the border between Norway and Sweden, or between the United States and Canada, is hardly noticeable. The reason why East Germany fenced off its long border with West Germany was that if it had not, it would have become a wasteland, for most of its people would have migrated to the west. Between 1949 when East Germany was separated from the West and 1961 when the wall was built, 2.7 million people crossed the border into West Germany. Of them, 160,000 escaped between January and August 1961. East Germany survived as long as it did because of the wall. And it ceased to survive because its people found a way of escaping that a wall could not block off: they went to Prague in Czechoslovakia and asked the West German embassy there for asylum.

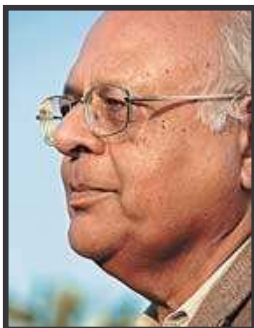
The East German government would not, of course, have admitted that it was preventing people from leaving its territory. It called the wall an “anti-fascist protection wall”; in other words, it was saving its people from being contaminated by the virus of fascism. The original fascist was Mussolini, who defined fascism as reaction – reaction to, and rejection, of the liberal avalanche unleashed by the French revolution which engulfed much of the west by the twentieth century. Liberty, Equality, Fraternity – that was the slogan of 1789. The liberal civilization of the west went into the crisis after World War I; all the industrial countries suffered terrible unemployment and economic decline. Capitalism was discredited; people sought alternatives. Russia sought it in communism; Italy and Germany sought it in fascism.

So it is ironic that the East German communists called the west fascist. Behind it was a fallacy of association. After World War II, the political and military leaders of Nazi Germany were tried and sentenced. But in West Germany, the Allies thereafter called a halt. They decided not to pursue the thousands who had served the Nazi government, and called it a day so that their part of Germany could recover and return to a normal life. The East Germans did not do it any differently, but found it convenient to transfer the mantle of fascism to western shoulders.

That was political rhetoric. But what led millions to want to leave the east and migrate to the west was not fascism or liberty or democracy, but the sheer prosperity of West Germany. When I went to Germany, large parts of its cities were still in ruins. The hills along the north coast of the bay of Kiel are dotted with luxurious villas today. So they were in the 1930s too; but in 1962, they were like haunted houses – broken and surrounded by unkept, overgrown gardens. But people had jobs; they had work to do, and they were paid to do it. Work was the new religion of West Germany; the people I came to know just put their past behind and worked to build a future. I remember getting into a train once and finding myself next to a man who had recently been released by the Soviets and come back to West Germany. He started talking to me of the past – of how times were better under the Nazis. Our neighbours shut him up; they just did not want to remember the past. Life was hard enough. For many of them, life must have been better under the Nazis. But that was all past; all that mattered was the future, and they wanted to make it better.

And the reason why they were so focused on the future, and on economic success, was that unlike the socialist societies, national or otherwise, they had to compete to succeed in the new Germany. Germany has very good social services, and had elements of them even in the 1960s; but when it came to the goods and labour markets, there were no hiding places. Everyone had to compete, and had to do his best. When East Germans came west, the West German government gave them 100 marks. But for the next 100 marks, they had to find work. Everyone admires the way the Germans work. This is justified. The Germans are extremely methodical; they lay even paving stones with the precision of a surgeon. But they do so not because of any biological quirk. It is not because Germans are addicted to work and do not know how to relax or enjoy themselves. One only has to visit Berlin over a summer weekend today to see how relaxed – and even cheerful – Germans can be. They work so well because that is how their labour market works. Their employers expect perfection, and their training schools make that perfection universally attainable.

So the German miracle – the miracle that melted the Berlin wall – is a miracle of the market economy, of an economy that makes everyone compete, but which also gives people a helping hand when they cannot compete – for instance, when they are too young, too old or too sick – and helps everyone hone his skills for getting the best out of the market economy. It is a school for freedom.



Dr. Ashok V. Desai is Consultant Editor of *The Telegraph* and a columnist in *Businessworld*, India's foremost financial magazine; his columns are an authoritative commentary on economic events in India. Before his journalistic career, Desai served as Chief Consultant in the Finance Ministry from 1991 to 1993, and helped design the early economic reforms. His inputs in the reform of taxation, trade policy and financial market regulation were particularly notable. In the 1980s, Desai coordinated a large survey of energy research for International Development Research Centre in Ottawa. In the 1970s, Desai taught and researched at the University of the South Pacific in Fiji as well as the University of Sussex in England. Earlier, Desai worked as an economist in National Council of Applied Economic Research in Delhi, where he carried out policy-oriented industrial studies, especially studies on technology development and transfer.