

20 Years Later: Why the Berlin Wall Fell?¹

Swaminathan S. Anklesaria Aiyar

We are approaching the 20th anniversary of the fall of communism. This comprehensively refuted the communist claim to represent the people. Yet the claim continues, sometimes dazzling a new generation of youngsters with no inkling of why the Berlin Wall fell on November 9, 1989.

In democratic capitalism, said Karl Marx, the rich became richer and the poor poorer. Marxism inspired young idealists for over a century. Lenin's revolution in Russia in 1918 was hailed as a new dawn. Stalin's invasions brought communism to Eastern Europe. Communist governments there pledged to create a paradise for workers, who would be freed from exploitative capitalists and instead work for the state, which would give them full employment and welfare.

Czech author Milan Kundera says of the communists, "they had a grandiose plan, a plan for a brand new world in which everyone would find his place: the creation of an idyll of justice for all. People have always aspired to an idyll, a garden where nightingales sing, a realm of harmony where the world does not rise up as a stranger against man, nor man against other men."

Problem: this supposed paradise was imposed at gun-point. Nevertheless leftist cheered, dismissing objectors as capitalist elitists. These elitists would deservedly be decimated, but the masses would get equality and fabulous benefits in paradise.

Alas, this equality was a sham: equality is not possible between those imposing the rules and those imposed upon. Eastern Europeans found that the supposed paradise was actually a cage in which they were fed and watered, but denied basic freedoms to speak, act or move. Masses of youngsters began emigrating from the communist paradises to the supposed hell-holes of the West.

Migration was easiest from East Germany to West Germany. Official migration touched 197,000 in 1950, 165,000 in 1951, 182,000 in 1952 and 331,000 in 1953. It was impossible to pretend that all these youngsters were just greedy capitalist reactionaries.

So, communist countries closed their borders and jailed those seeking to escape. Kundera says the communist paradise was supposed to be a place "where every man is a note in a magnificent Bach fugue; but anyone who refuses his note is a mere black dot, useless and meaningless, easily caught and squashed between the fingers like a fly. Since by (communist) definition an idyll is one world for all, the people who wished to emigrate were implicitly denying its validity. So, instead of going abroad they were put behind bars." Escape from paradise was forbidden: it might lead to the unthinkable notion that communism was not paradise after all.

The communist dilemma was worst in Berlin City, divided between a communist east and democratic west. Escape was easiest and most massive here. So in 1961 the communists built the Berlin Wall through the entire Berlin border. Unlike most security walls, this did not aim to keep outsiders out: it aimed to keep citizens caged within. Nevertheless thousands of East Berliners sought to cross, and hundreds were gunned down.

¹ First published in *Times of India*, <http://blogs.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/Swaminomics/entry/twenty-years-later-why-the>

The Brezhnev Doctrine of the Soviet Union held that once a country became communist, Soviet arms would keep it communist. Soviet tanks crushed uprisings in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968. The same doctrine took Soviet tanks into Afghanistan in 1979. But they suffered a humiliating debacle.

When Gorbachev became Soviet President, he withdrew from Afghanistan, ending the Brezhnev Doctrine. In 1989, he told communist rulers in Eastern Europe that they could no longer depend on Soviet tanks to thwart popular uprisings. Within three months, popular uprisings ousted communist regimes right through Eastern Europe.

In August 1989, Hungary dismantled border barriers with Austria. Within days, hordes of Eastern Europeans, including 13,000 East Germans, escaped into Austria. Mass demonstrations against communist rule erupted across Eastern Europe. To soothe public anger, the communists opened the gates of the Berlin Wall on November 9. Within days, Berliners had chipped away and broken the Wall, amidst delirious cheering. Soon after, the communist government fell.

Communists and socialists everywhere, including in India, were dismayed. They could not understand why East Germans blessed with income equality, free social welfare and full employment should flee to the highly unequal West, which bristled with unemployment and social perils. An answer came in a letter to a newspaper editor.

“My daughter’s hamster (a pet white mouse) has food, water, shelter and even medical care, and a cage full of fun curly tubes. The hamster responds by constantly trying to chew his way to freedom. I think we all understand what freedom is, and it is not a gilded cage.”



Swaminathan Aiyar writes a popular weekly column titled, "Swaminomics" in *The Times of India* where he discusses economic and political issues pertaining to India and the world. Aiyar has prepared several reports and papers for the World Bank. He was also, in 1976-85 and 1990-98, the India correspondent of *The Economist*. Author of two books, *Towards Globalisation* (1992) and *Swaminomics: Escape from the Benevolent Zookeepers* (Times of India, 2008), He is currently consulting editor of *The Economic Times*, India's leading financial daily that is part of Bennett, Coleman & Co. He is also a research fellow at the Cato Institute, a prominent libertarian think-tank in Washington DC.