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Citizens into prisoners

by Henry A. Kissinger

A foreword to "The Berlin Wall: 20 years after."

The Berlin Wall was the symbol of the Cold War, of Europe's division, and of the Communist challenge to human freedom. That it became so pivotal was the result of one of the anomalies of the postwar settlement. The joint occupation by the four victors—the United States, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and France—of Germany's capital, located ninety miles inside the Soviet zone of occupation, grew out of the wartime illusion of continued Allied cooperation in the governance of defeated Germany.

The premise was bound to be unfulfilled. Stalin saw in victory an opportunity to combine historic Russian imperialism with Communist ideology and insisted on installing Soviet-style governments in what he treated as Russia's sphere in Central and Eastern Europe up to the Elbe River. The principal states in that region—Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and, in its way, Germany—had been key participants in Western history for centuries and shared many of the West's fundamental values. To maintain dominance, the Soviet Union felt obliged to suppress all vestiges of independence and any political movement that deviated from Moscow's line.

Of all the satellites, the so-called German Democratic Republic (gdr) in the eastern part of Germany was in the most complicated position. It represented no historic entity; the division of Germany ran counter to established national feelings. Unlike the satellites farther east, it could be reached by Western—especially German—television, so that the people could see the difference in living conditions for themselves. The existence of the western part of Berlin as a de facto part of West Germany provided a symbol and, above all, an escape route for the disaffected. The growing number of refugees threatened to drain the country of its talents.

The Soviet Union sought to counteract these trends with periodic attempts at intimidation in the form of ultimatums threatening to cut access routes to Berlin, turning it into a free city, and severing its political links to the Federal Republic. But in the end, Moscow always recoiled from the

confrontation that such actions would have entailed. It opted for building the wall: a human atrocity but also a retreat from the Soviets' basic demands. From that point, the wall became a symbol of Communist inhumanity and historic irrelevancy. A state claiming international recognition could maintain itself only by turning its citizens into prisoners.

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At first, the wall also brought new perplexities to the Western alliance. It destroyed the myth that strengthening Western defenses and unity would lead automatically to a collapse of Europe's dividing line. It brought into sharp relief the fact that there was a gap between West Germany and its allies on the issue of German unification. Chancellor Konrad Adenauer had made the heroic decision to give the Western alliance precedence over unification. But as each crisis evolved, allied priorities emerged as not identical. For West Germany's allies, unification was an objective affirmed to maintain the support of a valued partner; it was not an inner necessity. For West Germany, over a historic period, it would be the test of the validity of its overall strategy. The Western allies saw in the wall a challenge to the freedom of West Berlin; however, they were prepared to run few risks to restore the unity of Berlin, on which they had agreed at the end of the war.

But German leaders could not sustain so passive an approach. They sought other options, culminating in the so-called Ostpolitik of the 1970s, seeking to achieve national goals by direct dealings with the Soviet Union. Though some in the West—including this writer—were at first disquieted by the prospect of a German national option in the East, the inherent dilemmas of the Soviet position led to a gradual weakening of long-term Soviet prospects. The Kremlin could achieve ratification of Ostpolitik in the West German parliament only by making a new agreement with the Western allies on Berlin, which removed previous possibilities of harassment. As with Germany, the evolution of Central Europe turned gradually into a Soviet rear-guard action secured by progressive concessions to Central and East European national sentiments and increased self-government.

The ultimate irony was that by the time the wall came down in November 1989, it had been made irrelevant by the actions of other satellite states, specifically Hungary and Czechoslovakia. These two allies of the German Democratic Republic refused to accept the premise of the wall and permitted East German refugees in their countries to move on to West Germany. Henceforth, the GDR could have hung onto its citizens only by building a wall around the entire country.

In June 1990, I had the privilege of appearing on a "Firing Line" program with William F. Buckley, Jr. in Berlin. It was his first visit to the city since the wall had come down. We had a drink together and engaged in some melancholy reflections on what America might have done at various earlier points—in 1948 or 1953, or in 1956, 1961, or 1968—to accelerate the ending of Soviet domination, and how many lives might have been saved. But it was also possible that the totality of the Soviet collapse required a certain evolution and the ultimate uprising of the captive peoples.

The Soviet Union never succeeded in establishing governments that were accepted by their populations. Moscow lacked the values to turn the Central Europeans into willing adherents to the Soviet model. Despite the apparatus of the police state, a series of uprisings broke out—in East Germany in 1953, in Hungary in 1956, in Czechoslovakia in 1968—that could be put down only by the Soviet army. Poland, the largest of the so-called satellite states, was in a condition of incipient revolt in 1956 and then again with the emergence of the Solidarity movement in the 1970s, requiring Soviet forces to stand by in readiness to intervene.

After the occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968, Leonid Brezhnev, then Party Secretary, proclaimed a doctrine named after himself, according to which the Soviet Union would not permit the overthrow of any Communist regime once established. (The possible application of the Brezhnev Doctrine to China proved to be one of the reasons for Mao's willingness to begin negotiations with the United States.) As it turned out, the imposition of ideologically acceptable leaders in Eastern Europe did not end Soviet dilemmas. These leaders found that unless they wanted to govern with Soviet bayonets, they needed to appeal to the historic legitimizing principle of nationalism, linked now to some degree of democratization. This gradual, almost imperceptible, process was to undermine Soviet rule over the next twenty years.

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