

Twenty-five years since the fall of the Berlin Wall

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Historical anniversaries are an opportunity to look back at the past in order to draw lessons for the future. Nothing of the sort took place in the course of the official ceremonies held in the German capital Sunday to mark the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. The celebrations were organized by a government that does not dare to look reality in the face and call things by their real names.

The speakers made use of demagogic phrases and platitudes—the word “freedom” was uttered with mind-numbing frequency—to falsify history and avoid any reference to current social-political reality.

“The issue was to regain freedom. It was about the freedom a person needs to be human,” declared German Chancellor Angela Merkel at the opening of an exhibition on the Berlin Wall. But what freedom was she talking about?

Freedom from state surveillance and repression?

The government she has headed for the past nine years has passed one law after another restricting democratic rights and expanding the surveillance powers of the intelligence agencies. In Eastern Europe, which Merkel cited in her homily to freedom, monuments have been erected to authoritarian rulers such as Jozef Pilsudski in Poland, Miklós Horthy in Hungary and Nazi collaborator Stepan Bandera in Ukraine.

Freedom from material want?

In East Germany, 25 years after German unification, one in five residents lives below the official poverty threshold of 870 euros per month. In neighboring Poland and the Czech Republic, the average hourly wage is not even a third of that in Germany, and in Bulgaria and Romania, it is less than one-sixth. The economic crisis across the European Union has intensified dramatically.

Freedom from fear and war?

A nonstop avalanche of warmongering against Russia has followed the German government’s announcement of an “end to military restraint” at the beginning of the year. As was the case in the First and Second World Wars, German militarism is once again directed eastwards. “We must prepare ourselves for the fact that crises will unfortunately tend to be a fact of life in the coming years,” German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier recently wrote in *Die Zeit*.

Bourgeois ideologues announced the “end of history” 25 years ago, but history is returning with a vengeance. The fall of the Berlin Wall and German unification did not herald a new epoch of freedom and democracy. Rather, they brought to the surface all the unresolved problems that had led to two world wars in the first half of the 20th century.

The International Committee of the Fourth International anticipated this development and warned against it. In November 1991, the ICFI passed a resolution at the World Conference of Workers against Imperialist War and Colonialism in Berlin, which states:

“All the credit for the overthrow of Stalinism goes to the workers, but others have reaped the fruits. A new layer of parasites has betrayed the working class and has exploited its legitimate hatred of Stalinism for its own aims. The Yeltsins, Walesas and Havel replace the dictatorship of the Stalinist bureaucracy with that of international capital and assume the role of a comprador bourgeoisie.

“While the Stalinist bureaucracy, in the interest of self-preservation, had been forced to preserve important gains of the October Revolution like the nationalization of the means of production, the emerging bourgeoisie now strives to smash whatever remains of the

nationalized industry and to transform the workers into starving pariahs with no rights.”

The Party of Democratic Socialism and the Left Party—the successor organizations to the Stalinist East German ruling party (Socialist Unity Party—SED)—unreservedly supported the reintroduction of capitalism. They complained only about being placed at a disadvantage in the division of the spoils.

However, the ICFI explained: “Stalinism bears the main responsibility for the present catastrophe.”

The Stalinist bureaucracy, the resolution continued, “rose to power on the dead bodies of the revolutionaries [of the Russian Revolution] of 1917 and destroyed the Bolshevik Party by transforming it into the apparatus of a privileged bureaucracy. It turned the Communist International into an instrument of its self-serving foreign policies, caused innumerable defeats of the international working class, and murdered an entire generation of socialist revolutionaries.

“[Mikhail] Gorbachev’s perestroika is the logical outcome of this counterrevolutionary tradition. It marks the transition from ‘socialism in one country’ to capitalist restoration. The bureaucrats chose Gorbachev as their leader in 1985 because they could no longer uphold their privileges as a parasite in the workers state and were searching for a new social pillar in the form of private property.”

Vital lessons for today must be drawn from this experience. The capitalist world economy is in its deepest crisis since the 1930s. None of the problems that brought the international financial system in 2008 to the brink of collapse have been resolved.

The ruling class has responded to this crisis, as it did in the past, with militarism, the build-up of the powers of the state, and unceasing attacks on the democratic and social rights of working people, while enriching itself immeasurably. Reunified capitalist Germany is playing a particularly aggressive role.

There is no way out of this crisis, which threatens the existence of mankind, within the framework of capitalism. All over the world, the working class is coming increasingly into conflict with the ruling class. However, in order to fight and win, it needs a viable political perspective.

Only the program of socialist internationalism—the overthrow of capitalism, the establishment of workers’ governments, the reorganization of the world economy

to accommodate the needs of society as a whole rather than the profits of a few—offers a way out of this impasse.

Understanding the counterrevolutionary role of Stalinism and the Marxist alternative—embodied in the Left Opposition and the Fourth International founded by Leon Trotsky—is the foundation of such a revolutionary perspective.



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