

Thirty years since the fall of the Berlin Wall

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Thirty years ago, the fall of the Berlin Wall marked the end of the GDR. We are republishing here an article by Peter Schwarz that first appeared on the WSWS five years ago, on November 8, 2014, under the headline, “25 years since the fall of the Berlin Wall.”

Sunday, November 9 marks the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. This event heralded the end of the German Democratic Republic (GDR—East Germany), forty years after it was founded.

The anniversary celebrations planned in Berlin are extensive. Some 8,000 glowing balloons marking the route of the wall will rise into the sky at 7 in the evening to the sounds of Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy.” Elderly pop stars such as Udo Lindenberg and Peter Gabriel, joined by the Berlin Staatskapelle under Daniel Barenboim, will give a concert at the Brandenburg Gate.

The regional broadcaster RBB is devoting an entire day to the fall of the Wall. A press release states that the programming on the anniversary “seeks to revive the endless joy of 1989 and make palpable the craziness of the time.”

German President Joachim Gauck already attended an October 9 ceremony in Leipzig on the topic “Twenty Five Years of Peaceful Revolution.” There, he compared the protests against the East German regime 25 years ago with the great revolutions of the 18th Century in America and France and “the German freedom movement of 1848.”

“Tens of thousands overcame their fear of the oppressors because their desire for freedom was greater than their fear,” proclaimed Gauck. “What was started by a few brave individuals became a movement of the masses that grew inexorably into a peaceful revolution.”

The attempt to recast the end of the GDR as a liberal revolution and summon up the euphoric atmosphere that marked the fall of the Berlin Wall has one goal: to prevent the drawing of a sober balance sheet on German reunification and consideration of what really happened in the autumn of 1989. The more gloomy the present, the more advanced the social disintegration, the more pronounced the decline of democratic institutions, the more virulent the return of militarism, the brighter capitalist restoration in the east and German reunification must be made to shine in light of the “liberal revolution.”

Social counterrevolution

From a social standpoint, the end of the GDR was not a revolution, but a counterrevolution. Along with the return of capitalism, unemployment, crass exploitation, social inequality and abject poverty returned to eastern Germany.

The GDR’s well-developed industry, which guaranteed full employment and social security, was virtually razed to the ground. The Treuhandanstalt, charged with privatising the state-owned industries, disposed of 14,000 nationalised enterprises. Some were sold off; most were shut down. Within three years, 71 percent of all workers had either been forced to find new jobs or remained unemployed. Today, the number

of manufacturing jobs in the east is a mere quarter of the total in 1989.

The result is the depopulation of entire regions, leaving a preponderance of older people. In 1989, there were 16.7 million people living in the GDR. By 2006, the number of people in the former East Germany had fallen to 14.6 million, a decrease of 13 percent. Since over 60 percent of those who emigrated were under 30, and the birth rate fell dramatically, the average age of the population has risen sharply.

The GDR’s well-developed educational and social welfare system—as well its dense network of cultural institutions—were destroyed. Just in the state of Saxony, which has around 4 million inhabitants, over 1,000 schools have been closed since 1989.

The claim that this was all merely a transition and process of adjustment has been exploded by the welfare “reforms” imposed under the Hartz laws and the financial crisis of 2008.

Even 25 years after German unification, living conditions in the east and west of Germany differ widely. In 2013, the average gross income of a worker in the eastern states was 25 percent lower than in the west. Household assets in the east, at 67,000 euros on average, are only half as high as in the west, at 153,000 euros.

If there has been any convergence, it has taken the form of pushing wages in the west down towards the level of those in the east. According to data from the Federal Statistical Office, average real wages in Germany in 2013 were below the level of 1995. The hourly wages of low earners have fallen in real terms by as much as 20 percent since 1995. In contrast, top incomes have increased significantly.

The repressive powers of the state

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the dictatorship of the Stalinist German Socialist Unity Party (SED) and the East German secret police, the Stasi, was replaced by the dictatorship of the banks and corporations, with their paid-for politicians, controlled media, and right-wing intelligence agencies.

In retrospect, compared to the American National Security Agency (NSA) and its German counterparts, whose vast network of surveillance was revealed by whistle-blower Edward Snowden, the East German state security apparatus was, in American parlance, “bush league.” Next to the newly built Foreign Intelligence Agency (BND) headquarters on Berlin’s Chausseestraße, the former Stasi headquarters on Normannenstraße looks downright modest.

The Secret Service offices that replaced the Stasi have proven to be a breeding ground for right-wing extremism. In 2003, the Supreme Court rejected a ban on the far-right German National Party (NPD) because one in seven party functionaries were on the payroll of the Secret Service, making the organization an “affair of state,” according to the judges. The Thuringia state Secret Service financed, to the tune of hundreds of thousands of euros, the regional far-right milieu from which the fascist and terrorist National Socialist Underground (NSU) group emerged.

The Berlin Wall, whose fall is being celebrated on Sunday, has arisen anew—along the external borders of Europe. The 100 to 150 who died trying to traverse the Berlin Wall between 1961 and 1989 are just a fraction of the 25,000 who have died since 1990 in the Mediterranean seeking refuge in Europe.

Democratic rights that were long considered untouchable are now under attack. Two days before the anniversary celebrations, rail company Deutsche Bahn AG, with the support of the German government, sought to ban the train drivers' strike and, to all intents and purposes, abolish the right to strike. The Unified Negotiations law currently being prepared by the government gives the German Trade Union Confederation (DGB) a monopoly comparable to that once enjoyed by the Stalinist labour federation FDGB in East Germany. Any industrial action that does not have the blessing of the DGB will be illegal under the new law.

Even the "free elections" that many demonstrators demanded in 1989 have turned out to be a fraud. Instead of being presented with the single "United List" of candidates that prevailed in the GDR, voters in reunified Germany are obliged to choose between various parties and candidates that agree on all fundamental questions. Their policies are determined by the demands and interests of German big business. As a result, turnout in the eastern states has fallen below 50 percent, a historic low.

The return of militarism

The most devastating consequence of capitalist reunification is the return of German militarism.

In his recent book, Green Party leader and former Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, a shameless spokesman for German imperialism, wrote that Germany, two decades after unification, remained trapped in "the old contradiction of the German middle position." He elaborated: "Germany is and remains too large for Europe and too small for the world."

In 1914 and 1939, Germany attempted to resolve this contradiction by conquering Europe so as to become a world power. The main thrust was to the East—the suppression of Russia. Now, Germany's ruling elites are again following the same path.

Supported by the media and all of the official political parties, the German president and government proclaim the "end of military restraint." In Ukraine, in concert with the political descendants of the Nazis' Ukrainian collaborators in World War II, the German and American governments orchestrated a coup to bring a pro-EU government to power. War-mongering against Russia is escalating. A nuclear war between NATO and Russia is no longer a theoretical hypothesis, but a real danger. In the Middle East, with the arming of the Kurdish Peshmerga, the German government signalled its determination to be actively involved in the next violent re-division of the region.

What happened in 1989?

The demonstrations that heralded the end of the GDR in 1989 were not the expression of a liberal revolution. They will be seen historically as a classic example of a movement unleashed by a general feeling of hopelessness and discontent with a regime that was politically manipulated and diverted into a dead end because it lacked a viable perspective.

Contrary to the official myths, the initiative to restore capitalism in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and the GDR came from the ruling Stalinist

bureaucracy itself. This privileged caste had in the 1920s usurped political power from the Soviet working class by suppressing and eventually physically liquidating the Marxist opposition.

It based its rule on the advanced property relations created by the 1917 October Revolution. But it did so as a parasite that sucks its host dry and ultimately destroys it. By suppressing workers' democracy, the Stalinist regime strangled the creative potential of the socialised property relations. On the international arena, the Kremlin and its dependent Communist parties strangled every independent revolutionary movement.

After the Second World War, the Stalinist bureaucracy served as an important pillar of the status quo that ensured the continued domination of capitalism on a global scale. In consultation with the Western Allies, Stalin extended the influence of his regime into Eastern Europe. The Stalinists abolished capitalist property in East Germany (GDR), Poland, Hungary, Romania and the other Eastern Bloc countries, but, as in their crushing on June 17, 1953 of the East German workers' uprising, they suppressed every independent movement of the working class.

These conditions could not last forever. Leon Trotsky, the leading Marxist opponent of Stalinism, had anticipated this. In 1938, in the founding programme of the Fourth International, he wrote: "Either the bureaucracy, becoming ever more the organ of the world bourgeoisie in the workers' state, will overthrow the new forms of property and plunge the country back to capitalism, or the working class will crush the bureaucracy and open the way to socialism."

The globalization of capitalist production in the 1980s plunged the autarkic national economies of the Stalinist countries into crisis. As Trotsky had predicted, the Stalinist bureaucracy responded by seeking to create a new basis for their privileges through the introduction of capitalist property relations. This was the significance of the election of Mikhail Gorbachev as general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1985.

SED General Secretary Erich Honecker hesitated to emulate Gorbachev. But the majority of the SED leadership had long since chosen the path to capitalism and reunification. Three weeks before the Wall fell, the SED Central Committee overthrew Honecker and replaced him with Egon Krenz, and then Hans Modrow.

Modrow, who as the last SED prime minister sealed the fate of the GDR, recalled in his memoirs: "In my view, the road to unification was absolutely necessary and had to be undertaken with determination." Günter Mittag, who was responsible for the GDR's economy for many years, confided to *Der Spiegel* that he had come to realize in 1987 that "Every chance has been squandered."

The demonstrations that spread over the country in October 1989 were pushing on an open door. This was clear to those in charge in the West. "It is quite wrong to act as if suddenly the Holy Spirit had come upon the squares of Leipzig and changed the world," confided then-German Chancellor Helmut Kohl in 2001 to his biographer Heribert Schwan.

That notion, he said, came from the "adult education brain of Thierse," an East German SPD politician. In fact, the decision was made in Moscow: "Gorbachev went over the books and had to acknowledge that he could not preserve the regime."

The civil rights movements, which in this period sprang up like mushrooms, agreed with the Stalinist bureaucracy on the goal of capitalist restoration. Hardly had they been founded than they sat down with the SED at the "Round Table" and eventually joined the Modrow government in order to prepare the unification of Germany.

Their leaders were recruited mainly from the middle class. Their spokesmen were pastors, lawyers and artists. What bothered them about the GDR was not the political oppression of the working class, but the fact that they lacked the lucrative career opportunities of their counterparts in the West. Angela Merkel, the current chancellor, and Gauck, the president, began their political careers in the east.

The demonstrators who demanded free elections in the autumn of 1989 and chanted, “We are the people,” did not understand these relationships. They expressed their outrage at the ruling bureaucracy.

The movement, which had started as a flight to the West, was socially heterogeneous and politically confused. It had neither a clearly defined goal nor an understanding of the social forces it confronted. For this reason, it could be easily manipulated.

The perspective of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party)

Only one party had foreseen this development 25 years ago—the Socialist Workers’ League (Bund Sozialistischer Arbeiter—BSA), the predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit—PSG). In numerous statements, articles and pamphlets, which were later published in book form as *The End of the GDR*, we warned of the devastating social consequences of capitalist restoration.

We also predicted the return of German militarism. As we declared in a statement of the BSA from June 2, 1990: “German imperialism finds itself more and more deprived of the possibility to expand ‘peacefully,’ i.e., purely economically. This inevitably leads to a revival of the traditional means of German expansionist policy—militarism.”

The BSA did not have sufficient political influence in the GDR to stop the restoration of capitalism. The Stalinist SED regime had bitterly persecuted the Trotskyist movement for decades and suppressed the Marxist critique of Stalinism. Therein lay its greatest crime, and not that it limited the “freedom” of capitalist profiteers, speculators and petty-bourgeois careerists.

In 1989, the workers of the GDR were taken by surprise. Cut off from their own history by the falsifications of Stalinism, prevented from exchanging political ideas and organizing freely, they lacked the political understanding and programmatic clarity they required to oppose capitalism.

None of the problems of that time have been resolved. All over the world, the working class today is faced with falling incomes, unemployment, welfare cuts, increased state repression and the threat of war.

A balance sheet of the last 25 years and an understanding of the events of 1989, the character of the GDR and the role of Stalinism are important prerequisites for conducting the struggle against capitalist reaction today.



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