

THE BERLIN WALL REVISITED

Memories: Television, radio-- recent broadcasts brought recollections of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Celebrations included assembled European leaders, a US President, personally absent but present on video and internet streams, and the current

German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who walked symbolically from her old home in the East in the direction of the West where she now holds office.

Ceremonies occurred at a medium pace, thus seeming to belie the popular impression that the Berlin Wall had come tumbling down not only decisively, but swiftly. Victor Sebestyen's new book offers an altered version: (1) In its pages the crumbling of the wall was an evolutionary process that takes place over more than a decade, and occupies part of an essential, more encompassing era in history -- the transformation of Eastern Europe from a stark place "frozen in Soviet time", to a lively geopolitical space moored to western democratic and economic principles.

This is an evolution that is a highly personalized one. The hard-fisted East German Erich Honecker figures prominently; he who once compared Western and Eastern systems as the difference "between fire and ice." The Czech Republic's Velvet Revolution is balanced by its leader's, the poet/philosopher Vaclav Havel's, agonizing time as a jailed prisoner turned protester. Lech Walesa's Solidarity movement receives justifiable attention, as does his own ability to make a name for himself within the union's ranks. His was ultimately a political climb energized by a term of imprisonment in a bleak, steppeland environment near the Russian border that was punctuated only by a brief weekly talk with a priest and an occasional visit with his wife.

Mikhail Gorbachev's rise to prominence seems tame and astonishing at the same time. Always ambitious, always confident, he made his way craftily from an isolated birthplace near the northern Caucasus mountains between the Caspian and the Black Sea, and then moved successfully upward through a Soviet hierarchy known to prize both mediocrity and sycophancy. However, loyalty and administrative capabilities attracted superiors, and ultimately led from farmland and agricultural bureaucracies to the pinnacle of political power in the turreted Kremlin. Gorbachev's own experience fostered a firm ideological belief in national strength, and equally, a practical bent that once led him to say to a Western leadership: "we can do business together."

Were there no structural factors behind the fall of the Berlin Wall? A focus on leaders and leadership qualities does not prevent either their consideration or interface with personalities. The night the Berlin Wall actually tumbled featured mounting public pressure for change, western crowds waiting with champagne and flowers, swift administrative shifts in laws governing the issue of visas by East Germans to East Germans, a lack of official knowledge as to how to apply them, and a series of miscommunications along with an accidental opening of a border crossing through which thousands then streamed.

US President Reagan's "tear down this wall" speech was erected on a base of nearly four decades of a Western "containment" policy. His words also rode atop a despairing wave of pervasive Soviet decline. There had been a steep drop in oil output and revenues in the 1980's and an increasing inability to cope with the growing indebtedness emanating from the eastern Soviet states. There was a notable defeat in Afghanistan, an incapacity of a mighty centralized government and military to conquer a nation without a real national identity or national institutions, held precariously together by the avaricious and shifting alliances of tribal political chiefs and organizations. A loss of empire had become a devastating cultural and psychological loss as well. But through it all, Mikhail Gorbachev appeared to have abandoned his practical side, and maintained a rigid belief that an equally strenuous ideology would hold a now antiquated, fragmenting realm together.

"Revolution 1989" appears at an appropriate time. Somehow, there's a lesson in this diverse, detailed book for anyone who is interested. (1) Sebestyen, Victor. "Revolution 1989; The Fall Of The Soviet Empire." (2009): New York, Pantheon Books.