

The fall of the Berlin Wall

9 November 2009

November 9 marks the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Since 1989, pictures of rejoicing people, hugging each other and dancing on top of the Wall after the opening of the border crossing, have been used as symbols for the collapse of the GDR (German Democratic Republic) and the other Stalinist regimes that had come to power in Eastern Europe after the end of the Second World War.

Numerous celebrations are being held in Germany to mark the event. Thousands of visitors from throughout the country and abroad are expected to attend a “Festival of Freedom” around the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin. Amongst others, French President Nicolas Sarkozy, Russian President Dimitri Medvedev, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown and US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton will take part in the ceremony.

Popular enthusiasm for the event, however, is limited. According to a recent opinion poll, some 23 percent of eastern Germans consider themselves as losers in German unification. Another 30 percent see improvements in travel, housing and freedom, but consider developments in the area of income, health, social security and social justice to be negative. Only 32 percent assess their economic situation as “good”, compared to 47 percent in 1999.

The contradiction between official enthusiasm and public discontent speaks volumes about the real significance of the events of November 1989. The efforts of the media to glorify them as the beginning of a new epoch of democracy, freedom and peace grow all the louder the more obvious it becomes that they were nothing of the kind. There are few events in recent history that have been as thoroughly mystified as the end of the GDR.

The fall of the Wall initiated the end of a dictatorial regime that oppressed any sign of opposition, particularly from workers, employing a host of secret service agents. However, it was replaced not by democracy, but by another dictatorship—the dictatorship of capital. Following the fall of the Wall, the lives of East Germans changed dramatically—without any consultation or democratic participation of the people.

A total of 14,000 state-owned enterprises were sold, broken up or liquidated by the Treuhandanstalt (Trust Agency), whose leading figures consisted of representatives from western German big business. Some 95 percent of the privatized companies were acquired by owners from outside eastern Germany. Within three years, 71 percent of all employees had either lost or changed their jobs. By 1991, 1.3 million jobs were destroyed and another million disappeared in the following years. The number of workers in productive industries today amounts to a quarter of the number in 1989.

Large sections of the eastern German population soon lost hope in the future. The declining birth rate is a telling indicator of the social significance of this process. It sank from 199,000 newborn children in 1989 to 79,000 in 1994.

The consequences of this industrial and social devastation persist to this day. The total population of the new federal states amounts to 13 million, significantly less than the 14.5 million in the GDR. Twenty years after the fall of the Wall, an average of 140 eastern Germans still migrate to western Germany each day.

For years, the unemployment rate hovered around 20 percent. Only in the last five years has it dropped to the current 12 percent. However, this

reduction stems not from the creation of new regular jobs, but from the spread of low-wage and part-time jobs. Every second employee in eastern Germany works under the low-wage threshold of €9.20 per hour. The average gross wage is €13.50 per hour, far below the western German level of €17.20.

The demand for “open elections”—at the heart of the demonstrations against the GDR regime in the autumn of 1989—has given way to disappointment about bourgeois democracy. During the last federal elections, just over 60 percent went to the polls in eastern Germany. In state and municipal ballots, the turnout was even lower.

Another myth about the autumn of 1989 is that the people overthrew the regime of the SED (the Stalinist Socialist Unity Party of the former GDR) in a “peaceful revolution”.

The mass demonstrations that spread through the whole country in the two months prior to the fall of the Wall did contribute to the rapid collapse of the GDR. But the decisive impulse came from elsewhere. The demonstrators were knocking down an open door. As the first of the “Monday demonstrations” moved through Leipzig on September 4, the end of the GDR had already been sealed.

The decision was taken in Moscow, where Mikhail Gorbachev had risen to head the Soviet Union in 1985. As part of “Perestroika”, he had set the course for the restoration of capitalism. He was looking for the support of the Western powers, and severed ties with the eastern European “brother” nations by giving absolute priority to Soviet economic interests and demanding world market prices for Soviet exports.

This drove the GDR—critically reliant on energy supplies from the Soviet Union—to the brink of bankruptcy. Under the pressure of financial problems on the one hand and a disaffected population on the other, the SED turned to the West German government, on whose financial loans it had long relied.

Günter Mittag, responsible for the GDR economy for many years, later admitted to *Spiegel* magazine that he knew as early as 1987 that “the game was up”. And Hans Modrow, the last SED prime minister of the GDR from November 1989 to March 1990, later wrote in his memoirs that he had considered “the course towards a unified Germany to be irreversibly necessary” and “had decisively taken that course”.

Contrary to official mythology, the initiative to introduce capitalism into the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and the GDR came from the ruling Soviet bureaucracy itself. This privileged caste had usurped power in the Soviet Union in the 1920s by displacing, suppressing and finally physically exterminating the Marxist opposition.

After the Second World War, this bureaucracy extended its rule into Eastern Europe, with the acquiescence of Moscow’s Western allies. It suppressed every independent movement of the working class—as on June 17, 1953, when it crushed the workers’ revolt in the GDR.

The Stalinist bureaucracy based its rule on the property relations established by the October Revolution in 1917. But it did so like a parasite that drains and finally destroys its host. By suppressing all forms of workers’ democracy, it strangled the creative potential of social ownership. On an international level, it and the Communist parties under its sway stifled every revolutionary movement. After the Second World War, it became a crucial pillar of the status quo, stabilising capitalist rule

on a global scale.

This condition could not last forever. Leon Trotsky, leader of the Left Opposition against Stalinism, had already in 1938 posed the alternative futures of the Soviet Union. In the founding program 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 into capitalism, or the working class will crush the bureaucracy and open the way to socialism".

Fundamental changes in the world economy, appearing in the early 1980s, sharpened the contradictions in the Stalinist countries to the breaking point. The globalisation of production, together with the introduction of computers and new communications technologies, left the nationally based economies of these countries far behind.

Signs of imminent social rebellion increased, especially with the rise of the Solidarity movement in Poland. As Trotsky had predicted, the bureaucracy reacted by overturning the new forms of property relations and throwing the country back into capitalism. This is the significance of Gorbachev's rise to power. It also sealed the fate of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe that owed their power exclusively to Moscow.

The demonstrators, marching through the towns and cities of the GDR in late 1989, were unaware of this context. They were venting their pent-up rage towards the ruling bureaucracy and a feeling of economic and political impasse. The movement originally began as a flight to the West. It was socially heterogeneous and politically confused, and had neither a clearly defined aim, nor an understanding of the social forces it was confronting. It thus lent itself easily to manipulation and exploitation.

The spokesmen of the protests came from the citizens' rights movement. They were priests, lawyers and artists whose demands were limited to a reform of, and dialogue with, the existing regime. As soon as the regime made a few initial concessions—replacing Erich Honecker with Egon Krenz and Hans Modrow—they worked closely together with the SED in order to bring the protest movement under control and hand over the initiative to the West German government of Helmut Kohl. First they participated in the "Round Table" talks with the government of Modrow, and then they joined it.

With its agreement to a monetary union with West Germany in the spring of 1989 the Modrow government sealed the end of the GDR. The introduction of the D Mark was a poisoned chalice. It created access to sorely desired West German consumer goods, but at the same time led to the complete collapse of the East German industrial base. Priced in D-marks, East German products were no longer affordable in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, with which the East German economy was closely intertwined, while, due to the lower level of productivity, Eastern products were not competitive in the West.

There were many workers taking part in the demonstrations in the autumn of 1989, but they lacked any perspective of their own to defend their social gains, which were intrinsically bound up with socialised property in the GDR. They had been cut off completely from the tradition of Marxism and only knew—and despised—its Stalinist perversion.

Their lack of perspective was itself a product of the decades-long domination of Stalinism, whose greatest crime was the systematic obliteration of the socialist traditions of the working class. Long before the founding of the GDR, Stalin had organised the liquidation of an entire generation of revolutionary Marxists in order to secure his regime.

Victims of the "Great Terror" of the years 1937/38 were not only the leaders of the October Revolution, but also most of the German communists who had fled to the Soviet Union in order to escape the Nazis. Those who survived were servile bootlickers who had betrayed their own comrades to the Stalinist hangmen. They later constituted the leadership of the SED.

Only the Trotskyist movement fought against Stalinism from a Marxist standpoint. While the Western media and politicians had access to the

people of the GDR, the Trotskyists remained banned and were regarded as public enemy number one until its very end.

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) not only fought against Stalinism but also against all those who adapted to it, such as the United Secretariat led by Ernest Mandel, which regarded the emergence of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe as proof of the capacity of Stalinism to play a progressive role. Under the most difficult political conditions, the ICFI defended for decades Trotsky's standpoint that Stalinism could not be reformed but had to be overthrown by a political revolution.

In the autumn of 1989 the German section of the ICFI intervened in the GDR in order to provide the mass movement against the SED regime a revolutionary orientation. The Socialist Labour League (Bund Sozialistischer Arbeiter), predecessor organisation to the Socialist Equality Party (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit), was the only organisation to warn of the disastrous results of a restoration of capitalism, without making the slightest concessions to the SED.

In an appeal distributed on November 4 at a mass demonstration in Berlin, the BSA explained, "Political freedom and democratic rights can be won only through a political revolution in which the working class overthrows the ruling bureaucracy, drives it out of all its posts and establishes independent organs of proletarian power and democracy, workers' councils, elected by the workers in the factories and neighbourhoods, accountable to them and based solely on their strength and mobilisation."

At the time, Ernest Mandel travelled personally to East Berlin in order to defend the SED against the critique raised by the Trotskyists of the BSA. His German co-thinkers took part in the Round Table and later in the government led by Hans Modrow. In this way, they played a vital role in cutting off the working class from the tradition of Marxism and setting course for the restoration of capitalism.

The end of the GDR, the Eastern European regimes and the Soviet Union unleashed a wave of triumphalism within the capitalist class, which it is now trying to revive with the current anniversary celebrations. However, such efforts cannot disguise the fact that capitalism all over the world finds itself in a profound crisis.

The contradictions between world economy and nation state—between the global character of production that has welded together millions of workers all over the globe in one socially unified process of production, and the division of the world into rival nation states—broke the back of the Stalinist regimes two decades ago. These contradictions, however, also lie behind the growing conflicts between imperialist powers, the escalating wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the unceasing attacks on the social gains of the working class and the arrogance and greed of the financial elite.

These contradictions will inevitably lead to the eruption of fierce social conflicts and revolutionary struggles. Workers must prepare politically by drawing the lessons from 1989 and adopting the international socialist program defended by the ICFI against Stalinism.

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