

THE NEW YORKER

COMMENT

NOVEMBER 9TH

by George Packer

NOVEMBER 16, 2009



Germany observes no official holiday on November 9th, the day when, twenty years ago, crowds of stunned, delirious East Germans breached the Berlin Wall. This is because November 9th is also the date on which Kaiser Wilhelm abdicated, in 1918, two days before Germany's defeat in the First World War. On November 9, 1923, Hitler attempted to overthrow the Weimar Republic, in the Munich Beer Hall Putsch. In 1938, November 9th was the Night of Broken Glass, when Nazi gangs attacked Jews and their property across Germany and Austria, foreshadowing the genocide to come. The German calendar is appropriately inconvenient: nothing good is conserved without the active remembrance of something bad. The British writer Timothy Garton Ash has called 1989 the best year in European history. It delivered the Continent from its worst century—the new democratic European unity that began in 1989 was built on fifty million graves.

The chain reaction of nonviolent civic movements in Poland, Hungary, East Germany, and Czechoslovakia seemed like a miracle at the time, and it still does. Anyone who grew up knowing nothing but the Cold War could scarcely

imagine that the world wasn't eternally locked in permafrost. No Hegelian teleology predetermined that Communism would be left on the ash heap of history. In 1989, Francis Fukuyama published his essay "The End of History?," in which he predicted "the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government." This proved far too optimistic for the post-Cold War world, and even in Central Europe, where liberal democracy did emerge, the dramatic events that brought it about were messier and chancier than the dreams of neo-conservative philosophers.

The wall came down not because Ronald Reagan stood up and demanded it but because on the evening of November 9th, at a televised press conference in East Berlin, a Party hack named Günter Schabowski flubbed a question about the regime's new, liberalized travel regulations. Asked when they took effect, Schabowski shrugged, scratched his head, checked some papers, and said, "Immediately," sending thousands of East Berliners to the wall in a human tide that the German Democratic Republic could not control. Soldiers and Stasi agents didn't shoot into the crowd, but things could easily have gone otherwise.

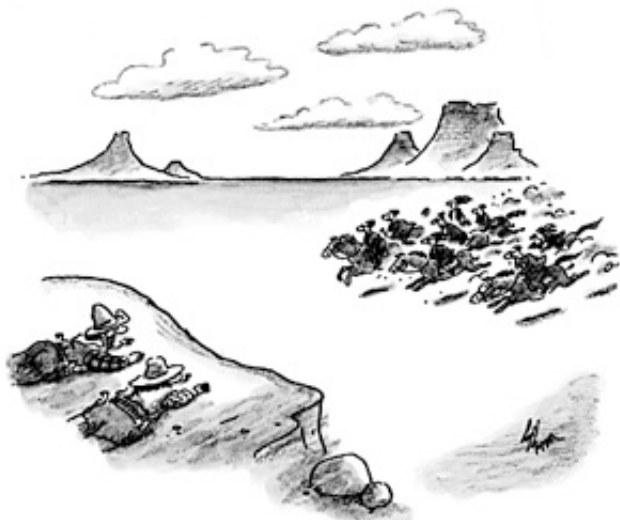
The revolutions of 1989 were made possible by a multiplicity of conditions: the courage of East Bloc dissidents and the hundreds of thousands of fellow-citizens who finally joined them; American support for the dissident movements and containment of the Soviet Union; the disastrous economies of the Communist countries; the loss of confidence among ruling-party élites; the crucial forbearance of Mikhail Gorbachev. For Europe's Communist regimes to disappear so suddenly and bloodlessly (Romania was a different story), everything had to fall into place, above and below, within and without. Such circumstances are improbably rare, and they can't be mechanically replicated by the laws of history or by divine design or by universal human aspiration. A false lesson drawn from 1989 involves a kind of shallow eschatology of totalitarianism: this is how it always happens—the people rise up, the regime withers and dies, peace and democracy reign. The chaos that followed the overthrow of Saddam Hussein was in part a consequence of this thinking. In planning the postwar period in Iraq, George W. Bush and some of his advisers had 1989 in mind—"like Eastern Europe with Arabs," as one official put it.

The last, briefest, and most thrilling of that year's peaceful uprisings, the Velvet Revolution, took place in Czechoslovakia. Over the next two decades, it produced a series of successors and imitators in Serbia, Ukraine, and Georgia. While they all improved the politics of their respective countries, none of them had a Václav Havel, and none of them created a stable liberal democracy. Whenever things fail to turn out as they did in Central Europe, people tend to react as if history had unaccountably malfunctioned. But if 1989 were the rule and not the exception, then Burmese, Chinese, and Zimbabwean dissidents—who have sacrificed far more than their European counterparts (in China, 1989 meant Tiananmen Square)—would be in power by now.

Perhaps the closest contemporary analogy to the fall of Communism is the democratic movement that is challenging the Islamic Republic of Iran. It has deep social and intellectual roots, a growing mass following, and an enemy state with a hollowed-out ideology. But, unlike the East German soldiers and the Stasi agents, the Revolutionary Guards and the Basij militia are ready to kill.

Behind President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, there is no restraining figure like Gorbachev. Iranians will have to find their own way to the fulfillment of their democratic desires. And yet the fact that the nearest counterparts to the thinkers and activists of 1989 are to be found in a non-Western, Muslim country exposes another false lesson of that year: that such things are for Westerners only, that "they" don't want what "we" want.

A recent Pew poll shows that Germans, Czechs, and Poles remain relatively enthusiastic about democracy and capitalism; Hungarians, Bulgarians, and Lithuanians less so. Former East Germans' hopes of achieving the living standards of their Western countrymen have not been fulfilled, and the inevitable disappointments have muted anniversary



"I don't think it's a posse—it looks more like a subcommittee."

celebrations. Last month in Dresden, a retired schoolteacher acknowledged the pining of some East Germans for their simpler, cozier former lives under state socialism. There's even a neologism for it: *Ostalgie*. But, the teacher said, "What matters is that I can talk with an American journalist without going to jail, that I can travel without filling out forms, that I can read what I want to read, that I'm not told what TV station I can watch and not watch, that at school I don't have to say something that I don't say in private at home. This is what is decisive to me today."

Twenty years after the revolutions of 1989, Europe's bitter half century of armed division is the object of profitable kitsch. At Checkpoint Charlie, in central Berlin, where an East German guard opened the gate at 11:17 P.M. that November 9th, you can now pay a euro to pose with hucksters wearing Soviet, British, French, and American uniforms. Neighborhoods that used to be separated by the wall have become hotbeds of the art scene, the gay scene, and the club scene. Meanwhile, Germans widely regarded the recent election campaign, in which fundamental issues were avoided, as a snooze. Berlin will never again be the hair-trigger focus of global ideological conflict, and Europe's place at the center of modern history is over. This proves not the failure of 1989 but, rather, its astounding success. No one is prepared to die for European unity, and no one will have to. ♦

ILLUSTRATION: TOM BACHTELL

To get more of *The New Yorker's* signature mix of politics, culture and the arts: **Subscribe now**