



Search (Economist.com)

Welcome
My account
Log out

Manage my newsletters



Site feedback

Monday December 28th 2009

- Home
- This week's print edition
- Daily news analysis
- Opinion
 - All opinion
 - Leaders
 - Letters to the Editor
 - Blogs
 - Columns
 - KAL's cartoons
 - Correspondent's diary
 - Economist debates

- World politics
 - All world politics
 - Politics this week
 - United States
 - The Americas
 - Asia
 - North East and Africa
 - Europe
 - Britain

- Special reports
 - Business and finance
 - All business and finance
 - Business this week
 - Economics focus
 - Management
 - Economics A-Z

- Business education
 - All business education
 - Which MBA?

- Markets and data
 - All markets and data
 - Daily chart
 - Weekly indicators
 - World markets
 - Currencies
 - Rankings
 - Big Mac index

- Science and technology
 - All science and technology
 - Technology Quarterly
 - Technology Monitor

- Books and arts
 - All books and arts
 - Style guide

- People
 - People
 - Obituaries

- Diversions

- Audio and video
 - Audio and video library
 - Audio edition

- The World In
 - The World in 2010
 - The World in 2009
 - The World in 2008
 - The World in 2007
 - The World in 2006
 - The World in 2005
 - The World in 2004

- Research tools

SEE HOW SAP CAN HELP YOU RUN A MORE EFFICIENT OPERATION

Europe

China's reaction to Communism's collapse

Keep calm and carry on

Nov 5th 2009 | BEIJING
From *The Economist* print edition

How Deng Xiaoping neutralised the country's worst moment



AP "THE East German people are now strengthening their unity under the leadership of the party." So declared China's Communist Party mouthpiece, the *People's Daily*, in October 1989. A month later the Berlin Wall fell. Even today, China's leaders find the memory painful.

China's state-owned media have mostly avoided the subject, as they have also stayed silent about the anniversary in June of China's own pro-democracy upheaval of 1989—tumult that was witnessed by Mikhail Gorbachev, Russia's leader, and which was bloodily suppressed only when he had gone home. They are probably obeying instructions from the Central Propaganda Department of the party. The party's keen interest in the cause of national unification (in its case, reclaiming Taiwan) has not helped ease its qualms about the fate of East Germany.

But freedom stirs, even here

Yet China's ruling party has devoted considerable energy to dissecting the causes of communism's collapse in eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

Official publishing houses have produced several works analysing them and drawing lessons from them. The first shock over, the party was quick not only to cement ties with eastern Europe's new democracies but also to develop strategies for avoiding their predecessors' fate.

In late 1989 China's anxiety was so profound and its diplomacy in such confusion that it was difficult to imagine it would ever come to terms with the new world order. Fresh unrest seemed unavoidable. It was far from certain that Jiang Zemin, a little known leader who had been appointed party chief in the wake of the Tiananmen Square unrest, was on firm ground.

China's dogged insistence that nothing untoward was happening in eastern Europe ensured that its awakening would be harsh. In early October 1989, even after thousands of East Germans had fled their country, China sent a senior leader to East Germany's official celebration of four decades of communism (a "glorious" 40 years, the *People's Daily* called it). East Germany's 77-year-old leader, Erich

Comment (59)

Recommend (75)

E-mail

Share

Print

Reprints & permissions

Related Items

- From *The Economist***
Mikhail Gorbachev and the fall of the wall
Nov 5th 2009
After the Soviet collapse
Nov 5th 2009
What happened in central Europe after 1989
Nov 5th 2009
Berlin re-united
Nov 5th 2009
Books that mark the anniversary of 1989
Nov 5th 2009
The Berlin Wall falls
Nov 18th 1989

Country briefing
Russia, China

Advertisement

SAVE \$348

The Fairy Tales Collection

All research tools
 Articles by subject
 Economics A-Z
 Special reports
 Style guide

Country briefings
 All country briefings
 China
 India
 Brazil
 United States
 Russia

My account home

Newsletters and alerts
 Manage my newsletters
 Manage my e-mail alerts
 Manage my RSS feeds
 Manage special-offer alerts
 More »

Print subscriptions
 Subscribe to *The Economist*
 Renew my subscription
 Change my print subscription delivery, billing or e-mail address
 Pay my bill
 Activate premium online access
 Report a missing copy
 Suspend my subscription
 More »

Digital subscriptions
 Subscribe to Economist.com
 Manage my subscription
 Mobile edition
 Audio edition
 Download screensaver
 More »

Classifieds and jobs

The Economist Group
 About the Economist Group
 Economist Intelligence Unit
 Economist Conferences
 Intelligent Life
 CFO
 Roll Call
 European Voice
 EuroFinance
 Reprints and permissions

EIU online store

Economist shop

Advertisement

Honecker, was a conservative much respected by China's own gerontocrats, and a backer of the crackdown in Tiananmen. His resignation that October was appalling to them.

It was an appeal for cool heads by China's 85-year-old senior leader, Deng Xiaoping, that helped China's rulers weather the storm. In September 1989 he told them—in a speech only published years later—to be “calm, calm and again calm” and to carry on with China's (mostly economic) reforms. Mr Deng's advice, and its later elaboration, remains China's guiding philosophy. Its central message is often summarised as *taoguang yanghui*, meaning “concealing one's capabilities and biding one's time”. Mr Deng wanted China to get on with building its economy and avoid ideological battles. The economy, in effect, would save the party.

David Shambaugh, an American scholar, wrote in a book published last year that China's most important conclusion from communism's ruin elsewhere was that an ossified party-state with a dogmatic ideology, entrenched elites, dormant party organisations and a stagnant economy was a certain recipe for collapse. The Chinese party, he argues, has been “very proactive” in reforming itself and adjusting its policies to new conditions.

Not everyone is satisfied. A website set up by a German group to gather internet users' comments on the Berlin Wall anniversary, www.berlintwitterwall.com, has been deluged with postings from Chinese complaining about China's “great firewall”, as the country's state-managed internet filtering system is often called. Access to the website has been blocked by China's internet censors for several days.

But China's media controls are not as impermeable as they were when the Berlin Wall fell. One magazine, *Southern Metropolis Weekly*—known for its risqué reporting—devoted 19 pages to the Berlin Wall in its October 30th issue. “Among those who love freedom, efforts will never cease to tear down walls that block and restrict interaction,” said one of the articles. Another said that no matter what difficulties Germans now faced, “there are probably very few who want to return to the days before the Berlin Wall's collapse”.

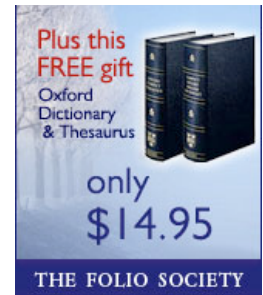
When President Barack Obama comes to China on November 15th, he will diplomatically avoid any public suggestion that China's party should disappear like its east European counterparts. In July, addressing a meeting of senior Chinese and American officials in Washington, Mr Obama noted that the tearing down of the Berlin Wall had unleashed a “rising tide of globalisation that continues to shape our world”. Perhaps to avoid embarrassing a crucial economic partner, Mr Obama did not mention the event's impact on communism. Mr Deng's strategy has paid off nicely.

[Back to top ^^](#)

Readers' comments

Readers have commented on this article (the window for new comments is now closed).

[View all comments \(59\)](#)





Want more? Subscribe to [The Economist](#) and get the week's most relevant news and analysis.

Advertisement

Classified ads

Office of Fair Trading
Non-Executive
Directors
London

Who's Who 2010 out
now
Information on
33,000+ people of
influence, interest
and distinction in
society today. New
names for 2010:
Roger Federer, Paulo
Coelho, Matthew
Brittin and Martin
Lewis.

Università Bocconi:
Economics and
Management
Education since
1902.
- Bachelor
- Master of Sciences
- PhD
[Download your
Welcome Kit!](#)

Standard Chartered
PLC
Senior Manager,
Thought Leadership

Explore Poland's
investment
opportunities

MBA-DBA-PhD
FRANCE, US, JAPAN,
CHINA
Boost your career
with accredited
Diplomas at ISM
Flexible schedules
Part-Time Study
Worldwide

Sponsor's feature

[About sponsorship](#)

THE FOLIO SOCIETY
Shorter Oxford English
Dictionary
with online access
only
\$19.95
and a FREE GIFT
worth \$87.50
SAVE \$417

[About The Economist online](#) [About The Economist](#) [Media directory](#) [Staff books](#) [Career opportunities](#) [Contact us](#) [Subscribe](#)

[Site feedback](#)

Copyright © The Economist Newspaper Limited 2009. All rights reserved. [Advertising info](#) [Legal disclaimer](#) [Accessibility](#) [Privacy policy](#) [Terms & Conditions](#)

[Help](#)