

The Berlin Wall and Me: Reflections on the Fall

By Thomas O'Boyle

Editor's note: As part of its Freedom Readers lecture series, Center for Vision & Values' Executive Director and Ronald Reagan biographer, Dr. Paul Kengor, interviewed Thomas F. O'Boyle on the evening of the [20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall](#). A newspaper executive, O'Boyle worked as a foreign correspondent in Bonn, Germany, for The Wall Street Journal covering the historic events leading up to that emotional day on November 9, 1989. He was there for President Reagan's historic Brandenburg Gate speech, which he covered for the Journal. It became clear to us that Tom had further valuable thoughts to share with students following the interview, and we asked him to share those thoughts in the way he knows best—with a pen. He has provided them in the following two articles. We think you'll agree that Tom O'Boyle's experiences covering East Germany more than 20 years ago continue to hold great meaning.

Part I

GROVE CITY, Pa. – The 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall has come and gone, and it was a good anniversary to celebrate indeed. Whenever freedom triumphs over captivity, whenever good triumphs over evil, that's an anniversary certainly worth savoring.

I celebrated the anniversary in a delightful setting, among a roomful of Grove City College students on this immaculate campus.

I was there at the invitation of Paul Kengor, the college's esteemed Reagan scholar, professor of political science and director of its Center for Vision & Values. He'd invited me because I was in Germany as a reporter for the Wall Street Journal covering the events of 20 years ago as they unfolded in the years leading up to the wall's historic fall.

As Paul and I tried to convey to the audience the absolute horror that the Berlin Wall represented—the extraordinary measures the East German government took to monitor and, in some instances, murder its citizens—I realized any attempt to describe it to the students would be insufficient.

It had been 20 years, and I hadn't thought much about Berlin and East Germany in a very long time.

In preparation for my conversation with Paul, I paged through the copious clip books from my time in Germany, which contain hundreds of stories I wrote. Some of the things I learned of, experienced and witnessed during my nearly four years there still defy explanation even today.

How do you explain to young people a government that would murder its own citizens?

I had long forgotten the story of Peter Fechter, the 18-year-old construction worker whose murder made him a legend. Reading the late William F. Buckley Jr.'s account of it in "The Fall of the Berlin Wall"—an excellent book, by the way—rekindled my memory.

On Aug. 17, 1962, Fechter became the first fatality at the newly constructed wall, erected one year before, almost to the day. Fechter and a companion tried to climb over the wall in broad daylight. The colleague made it, but Fechter was shot as he reached the top of the wall. He fell back on the eastern side.

The Vopos—the infamous Volkspolizei—did nothing. Within earshot of a gathering crowd on the western side of the wall, and within sight of Checkpoint Charlie, Fechter was left lying in the sun and screaming for help. The U.S. military did not want to risk an “incident,” and couldn’t get clearance in time from the White House to intervene.

It took 65 minutes before Fechter bled to death and his body was dragged away. That was victim No. 1. There would be hundreds more before the wall finally came tumbling down.

How do you explain to young people the kind of hardships East Germany’s citizens endured?

Young people nowadays are accustomed to unprecedented and instantaneous communications freedoms. The idea that family members on opposite sides of a manmade partition might not have been able to contact one another for *years*—intentionally kept apart by a government determined to keep them apart—seems like a stone-age anachronism now.

How do you explain to young people the extraordinary surveillance to which East Germany’s citizens were subjected?

Buckley in his book quotes no less an expert on German-Nazi crimes than Simon Wiesenthal, who told a researcher, “The Stasi [East German state police] was much, much worse than the Gestapo, if you consider only the oppression of its own people.”

East Germany had the greatest concentration of domestic spies of any totalitarian government in recent history. Here are the figures: the KGB had about one agent per 5,830 citizens. The Nazis, according to Wiesenthal’s figures, had one Gestapo officer per 2,000 citizens. The Stasi had one officer per 166 citizens. And if you include in that count the unofficial collaborators—the infamous *Mitarbeiter*, who were either paid or blackmailed to gain their cooperation as they ratted on family and friends—the ratio is as low as one officer for every six to seven citizens.

As I related some of these facts on the evening of November 9 to the students in the audience before me—looking out at them from the podium and studying their faces—I was struck by their absolute innocence. And struck, too, by this thought: I was once just as innocent.

When I was that same fresh-faced college student in the 1970’s (just up the road from Grove City at nearby Allegheny College in Meadville, Pa.), I hadn’t encountered government-orchestrated evil. Other than reading about it in history books, I really didn’t have even the faintest notion that such a thing existed.

To the extent I was aware of what “worldview” I held then, it reflected my known world until that time. I was raised in a household that usually pulled the lever for liberal Democrats (Democrats were much more conservative then than they are

now). It was ethnic (Irish-German ancestry) and working-class (son of a Newark, New Jersey, fire chief). As for the church, “me mother she was orange (Protestant) and me father he was green (Catholic),” as it says in the Irish ditty. I attended Mass with me father.

As for my worldview, I believed that people were mostly good; that when you died, good works paid your way into heaven; and that government—“by the people, for the people”—was mostly well-intentioned.

By the time I married and began having children of my own, I held true to these beliefs. And except for the church—I converted to Protestantism when I married my wife Louise—these were pretty much the same views I held when I arrived in Germany in January of 1986, as a 30-year-old journalist writing for one of the world’s top publications.

Then I encountered the barbarous Berlin Wall. It changed me forever. In my next piece, I’ll try to explain some of what I experienced firsthand, and some of what I saw. Perhaps, then, you’ll have a better understanding of how the Berlin Wall changed me. Perhaps I will, too.

Part II

PITTSBURGH, Pa. – The first time I saw the Berlin Wall was a moment I will never forget. It was in February of 1986. I was in West Berlin to cover the release of the celebrated Jewish refusenik Anatoly Sharansky, who after nine years of imprisonment in the Soviet gulag crossed from captivity into freedom over Berlin’s Glienicke Bridge, the East-West span spotlighted in prior prisoner exchanges.

The night before his release, a colleague and I went to an observation deck overlooking the wall that stood within a stone’s throw of Hitler’s infamous Reichstag, the government building from which he orchestrated the Third Reich. We were not far from the Brandenburg Gate, the place where President Kennedy had declared “Ich bin ein Berliner” after the wall’s construction; the same place where President Reagan would utter his famous challenge—“Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall”—a year later.

I had often wondered about the Berlin Wall as a child. It seemed incomprehensible, surreal—the concept of walling people in like animals was a notion my young mind simply couldn’t grasp. Seeing the wall for the first time, it didn’t disappoint.

A light snow was falling. From our perch on the Western side, I looked down into the East. As the snowflakes glistened in flood lights, it was almost as if you could hear the distant echo of cries from the past.

This was the first of many memorable experiences with the barrier that the East German government called the “anti-fascist protective rampart,” and the police who protected it. There was the occasion when I was put in a holding cell for about three hours because I was found to be carrying contraband as I crossed through Checkpoint Charlie into East Berlin—Tom Clancy’s first novel, “The Hunt for Red October” (which had the unfortunate image of a red Soviet sub on the jacket cover). There was the time when, while staying in one of East Berlin’s swankiest hotels, I was roused out of my bed at 3 a.m. by armed state police. They then proceeded to search my room—and me—while I stood there in my pajamas.

This sort of strange situation is representative of the working conditions Western journalists faced as they sought to tell the world what was going on in East Germany in the years preceding the wall's demise. I met people who demonstrated tremendous kindness, heroism and courage, under extremely trying circumstances—and, of course, people who displayed the worst of human motives and behavior.

Among the champions of freedom and liberty I knew was the Rev. Christoph Semsdorf, a Lutheran pastor in East Berlin whose unauthorized contact with me as a Western journalist was considered a "treasonable act" under East German law that could have landed him in jail. Yet he insisted that his identity be revealed in the story I wrote about him and his "subversive" activities.

The church "can't be a voice for change if we do things in secrecy," he told me. "It's necessary for us to speak out. Otherwise, how will the political climate improve?"

As it turned out, the church played a pivotal role in bringing down the East German government and halting the atrocities Rev. Semsdorf and others had endured for generations. Two years later, on Sept. 4, 1989, I was in a service at the Lutheran St. Nikolai Church in Leipzig, among 1,000 people who gathered as they did every Monday evening at that time to pray for their deliverance from East Germany.

"We want out," the faithful chanted as they spilled out onto the streets of Leipzig, under the ever watchful eye of state security.

Yet their indomitable spirit could not be contained: Two weeks later, following another of these Monday night services, the demonstrators erupted into a full-scale march, which as it spread beyond Leipzig unleashed the final torrent of protest that brought down the wall and, ultimately, even the Soviet Union itself.

That was the heroism, but there was far more that was despicable. The damage to the environment was literally breath-taking, as the burning of brown coal left a heavy cloak of foul smelling smog over dense population centers, especially in wintertime. Their automobiles—particularly the infamous Trabant—rode like a stagecoach and spewed filthy exhaust. Other consumer goods were in short supply and of poor quality.

One of the few industries East Germany seemed able to perfect during its existence was products related to incarceration. One trip I took to a town on the Western side of the inner-German border offered a lovely view of picturesque countryside—until one caught a glimpse of the wall partitioning the two Germanys. Actually, on the Eastern side, it was a series of barriers and walls. There were bunkers, trip wires, electronic and acoustic alarms, concrete observation towers, dog runs, lampposts—every type of security device imaginable.

On the Western side, there was a solitary white cross, erected by the local townspeople of Rasdorf, marking the spot just a few feet beyond the barriers, on the Eastern side, where a father and son had bled to death on Christmas Eve in 1975. They were shot trying to escape.

As I wrote at the conclusion of my last piece, my encounters with the Berlin Wall changed me forever. How could they not? Here are the lessons I learned from my many experiences and the impact they had on my worldview:

First, it convinced me of the incontrovertible truth in the old adage: that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. This is true of all institutions, but especially government, because of the unique authority it holds. Any government that has absolute and total control of its citizens is bound to crush them, and in turn be crushed—eventually—under the weight of its own depravity and tyranny.

Why? Because of the second lesson I learned: that man's potential for evil and inhumanity is limitless. Mankind needs moral boundaries.

Which brings me to the third lesson I also learned. It was the same point a German philosopher in the 19th century understood very well. When Friedrich Nietzsche penned the words "God is dead" in his influential work, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra," he realized that the divine was the only source of discerning right from wrong in the universe. Without God, there are no boundaries and thus no morality.

It's worth remembering that one of Nietzsche's greatest fans was the man without whom the Berlin Wall probably never would have existed: Adolf Hitler. It is said Hitler kept a copy of the book on his bedside table.

— Thomas O'Boyle is the current circulation marketing manager of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, where he previously served as the publication's business editor and assistant managing editor.