

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Europe, Great Britain > Eastern Europe & Russian Federation > USSR, Soviet Bloc, Russian Empire (history) > **Berlin Wall: 20 years after: a lost opportunity**

# Berlin Wall: 20 years after: a lost opportunity

Saturday 14 November 2009, by [RAMONET Ignacio](#) (Date first published: 12 November 2009).

**PARIS, Nov (IPS) It's been twenty years since the Berlin Wall came down, on November 9, 1989. Today, as capitalism staggers beneath the blows of a historic crisis, what can we say about the intervening two decades? Why have other equally offensive and unacceptable walls not fallen?**

Symbolically the fall of the Berlin Wall marks the end of the Cold War as well as of authoritarian state communism in Europe -though the Soviet Union will not collapse until December 1991. But it does not mark the end of the aspirations of millions and millions of poor people to live with dignity in a world with greater justice and equality.

There are at least three crucial events of the 1980s that lead to the fall of the Berlin Wall:

First, the strikes of August 1980 in Poland, which bring to light a fundamental contradiction: the working class opposes a "workers state" and the supposed "working class party". The official theory that state communism rested on is gone.

Second, in Moscow in March 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev is elected secretary general of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and launches "perestroika" and "glasnost", thereby setting in motion, with the care and planning of an explosives crew, reform of Soviet communism.

Third, in spring 1989 in Beijing, on the eve of the visit of Mikhail Gorbachev, thousands of demonstrators demand similar reforms in China. The Chinese government responds by sending in the military. The result is hundreds of dead and international condemnation of the regime.

When in fall 1989 East German citizens take to the streets to demand democratic reforms, authorities are uncertain whether or not to open fire on the crowds. Moscow announces that its troops stationed in Eastern Europe will not participate in any acts of repression. The protests grow in intensity. The die is cast. The Berlin Wall falls. In a short few months, the communist regimes of Europe topple, including those of Yugoslavia and Albania.

It is important to point out that the system collapses because it is rotten from within, not because it succumbs to a capitalist offensive. In these years, the United States finds itself in a serious recession that begins after Wall Street's "Black Monday", October 19, 1987, when the Dow Jones stock index drops 23 percent.

However, the interpretation commonly given is that the battle between communism and capitalism that began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century culminates in a knock-out victory for the latter. It is this assumption that sparks the intellectual giddiness that makes some believe in the "end of history".

This is a fatal mistake. Having lost its "best enemy", the constant struggle against which had required it to regulate itself and moderate its impulses, capitalism now gives in to its worst instincts. Forgetting the promise made to bring the world the benefits of the "peace dividend", Washington

instead imposes a forced march to spread what it believes is its winning idea: economic globalisation. In other words, the extension to every part of the globe of ultra free-market principles: financialisation of the economy, scorn for the environment, privatisation, liquidation of local services, elimination of job protection, marginalisation of unions, and brutal competition among all workers of the world caused by outsourcing and other strategies. In short, what follows is a return of savage capitalism. American multimillionaire Warren Buffet proclaims: "There's class warfare, all right, but it's my class, the rich class, that's making war, and we're winning."(1)

On the military front, Washington unleashes its hyperpower: the invasion of Panama, the Gulf War, the enlarging of NATO, the war in Kosovo, the marginalisation of the United Nations. After the attacks of September 11, 2001, George W. Bush and his hawks decide to punish and conquer Afghanistan and Iraq. They slash aid to the countries of the South and launch a crusade against "international terrorism" using all means available, including the most vile: universal surveillance, torture, "disappearances", secret prisons, illegal detention like that at Guantanamo. They create a unipolar world run by US hegemony certain of themselves and their domination.

The fallout will be disastrous: no real military victory, a vast moral defeat and ecological destruction, all without eliminating the primary dangers. The terrorist threat has not disappeared, maritime piracy is on the rise, North Korea has nuclear weapons, Iran may acquire them, and the Middle East remains a powder keg.

The world has become multipolar. Large countries -Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa- are forging alliances at the margin of traditional power arrangements. In South America, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela are exploring new modes of socialism. Even the appeals to the G-20 to help with the global financial crisis confirm that the rich countries of the North cannot solve the world's major problems alone.

The historic opportunity presented by the fall of the Berlin Wall has been squandered. The world is not better off today. The climate crisis presents a mortal danger to humanity. The four current crises -food, energy, ecological, and economic- are frightening. Inequalities increase. The wall of money looms taller than ever: the wealth of the fifty richest people of the planet exceeds that of the poorest 500 million. The wall that separates the North from the South is still intact: malnutrition, poverty, illiteracy, and the lack of health care have grown more severe, especially in Africa. Not to mention the wall of technology.

And then there are the new walls that have been raised, like that Israel built to separate it from the Palestinians, or the one Washington built along its border with Mexico to keep out Latin American immigrants, or those erected in Europe to keep out Africans. When will we decide once and for all to destroy all of these shameful walls?

1. *The New York Times*, 26 November 2006.

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\* Ignacio Ramonet is the editor of *Le Monde Diplomatique* in Spanish. COPYRIGHT IPS