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Outlook

Life in Walltown, Germany

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Imagine waking up one fine Sunday morning to learn that they are laying down barbed wire in Washington. The coils cut off the western side of the District from Northeast and Southeast. Over the next three years, the steel wire is replaced by a wall of concrete 12 feet high. Now you are trapped, and if you're on the wrong side, the Washington Monument might just as well be the moon. Grim guards at fortresslike checkpoints along the District boundaries go through your papers and your car before you may proceed on special transit roads.

This is what happened in Berlin, starting on Aug. 13, 1961, and lasting until Nov. 9, 1989. I was there both times: when the Berlin Wall went up and when it came down. Did I know that history was being made? No, certainly not as the teenager I was back in 1961. But Karl Marx was right when he said that history plays out first as tragedy, then as farce.

The tragedy came in two parts. Part One looked like the run-up to World War III, as battle-ready American M-48 and Soviet T-55 tanks took up positions on either side of the Brandenburg Gate. But given the deadliest rule of the Cold War -- that whoever shoots first dies second -- the worst was averted.

Part Two was a 28-year prison term for the East Germans. Until 1961, some 3 million of them had absconded just by taking the subway from East to West Berlin, where they were flown elsewhere in West Germany. No more. The wall saved the so-called German Democratic Republic from death by a thousand cuts. Those East Germans who kept on trying to escape were shot by border troops or felled by killing devices triggered by trip wires.

For me, on the western side, East Berlin might as well have been Beijing. It actually felt even farther, for I could have traveled to Beijing (just not through the Brandenburg Gate). East Berlin remained off limits for West Berliners until 1970, when you could get a one-day pass -- but you had better be back before midnight. To this day, I know my way around Paris and New York better than around East Berlin.

The wall divided the city, the country, the continent and the world. A million soldiers on either side -- NATO in the West, Warsaw Pact in the East -- plus thousands of nuclear weapons squelched all temptation to change this map by force. There was no end in sight, for how could the Soviet Union ever give up the very bastion of its empire in the West, the strategic brace of its possessions in Eastern Europe?

But ultimately, it did -- and this is when farce followed tragedy. Mikhail Gorbachev, the new kid on the Bloc, who had moved to the head of the Soviet working class in 1985, merely wanted to reform the empire, not relinquish it. But once his grip loosened, the empire evaporated in the "velvet revolutions" of 1989.

In East Berlin, it was pure slapstick. Guenter Schabowski, the ruling party's propagandist, showed up at a news conference on Nov. 9 to announce eased travel policies. Totally unprepared, he was asked when the new rules were to go into effect. Flustered, he replied, "As far as I know . . . immediately, right away."

That was the end of the German Democratic Republic. Thousands of East Berliners soon thronged the wall, milling back and forth all night. Happily soused, they sang soccer ditties, not "Deutschland uber alles." The next day, East Berliners foraged farther into West Berlin, just to test whether they could get back in again -- or to buy bananas.

History was being made, all right, yet even then I could not believe that I was witnessing the collapse of a state, let alone of the Soviet empire, which would abolish itself on Christmas Day 1991. Even Chancellor Helmut Kohl didn't grasp what was happening. It took him three weeks to make a timid move -- for confederation, not reunification.

This was the first time that revolutions were "velvet," with not a drop of blood shed. And the first time that a mighty empire died without a war. Add to this a third novelty: the peaceful, even docile, disappearance of a state. History does not dispense gently of nations; they are destroyed, like Carthage, or gobbled up, like the Greek city states. The astonishing vanishing act of the GDR hardly fits that pattern.

Does this happy beginning have a happy end? Not yet. It takes more time to rebuild a nation than to raze a wall.

Here are some telling facts:

The unemployment rate in the former East Germany is twice that in the former West Germany.

The fertility rate in the east is lower than the already low 1.3 children per woman in the west.

Some 1.7 million easterners, or 12 percent of the population, have left for the west since the wall fell.

In a poll this year, 50 percent of easterners agreed with the statement that "East Germany had more good sides than bad sides." Eight percent signed off on the statement: "People there were happier and better off than today in reunified Germany."

Just as some easterners long for their lost paradise, many westerners think they would have been better off without reunification.

In the federal elections on Sept. 27, the big winner was Die Linke, the Left Party, which has grown out of the former Communist ruling party of the GDR. In western Germany, the Left Party got 8 percent; in eastern Germany, 26 percent, more than the Social Democratic Party of former chancellors Willy Brandt, Helmut Schmidt and Gerhard Schroeder.

So eastern Germany now has its own party (a bit like the historical American South, which voted Democratic for 100 years after the Civil War). Will that redivide the country along old lines and hinder its economic progress?

No. A modern economy, so tightly integrated into the world market, cannot flourish in the ways of the old GDR, with its overweening state, high social protection, and refusal to compete and to individualize. The GDR is history; the reunited Germany will keep moving toward a high-tech and service economy that will be driven by market forces and globalization, not by an all-providing state.

It takes time to move through the desert, as the children of Israel learned; memories of Egypt must die out first. But it will take less time in Germany than in the post-Civil War United States, where the South truly rejoined the North only in the 1960s. History moves a lot faster in the age of the Internet and the iPod.

Think of Angela Merkel. Not only is this chancellor a woman, she's also an easterner. It took the United States until 1964 to elect a Southern president, Lyndon B. Johnson of Texas. And not until 1976 did the country elect a "real" Southerner, Jimmy Carter, from the Deep South state of Georgia. Merkel, by contrast, was chosen 15 years after reunification.

When we celebrate this anniversary in another 20 years, few will remember what life was like in Walltown, Germany. On the eastern side, they will have forgotten the crumbling buildings, the daily shortages (bananas only at Christmas) and the fear instilled by wall-to-wall surveillance. On the western side, they will have forgotten that East Berlin once was farther away than Beijing. It will all be history. Josef Joffe, editor of the German weekly Die Zeit, is a senior fellow of the Freeman-Spogli Institute for International Studies and an Abramowitz Fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University.

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