

## **And the walls came tumbling down**

A paper for the Cincinnati literary club by Thomas Lorman

The Old Testament is, as theologians have often observed, an exasperating text. Rarely read from cover to cover, even its contents are disputed. At a recent funeral I read a moving passage from the Book of Wisdom which you will search for in vain in a Protestant or Episcopalian bible. Nevertheless, the original 24 books of the Tanakh, written in Hebrew, contain a wealth of stories that I am sure all of you listening tonight are familiar with. I would like to begin my paper by briefly recounting one of these stories, taken from the book of Joshua, which recounts how devastation was inflicted on the fortress city of Jericho. With its vast walls, Jericho appeared to be an impregnable barrier to the Jewish people, preventing them from reclaiming their promised land of Canaan after their captivity in Egypt, but, as the splendid translation known as the King James Version recounts:

“...the LORD said unto Joshua, See, I have given into thine hand Jericho, and the king thereof, and the mighty men of valour. And ye shall compass the city, all ye men of war, and go round about the city once.... Thus shalt thou do six days and the seventh day ye shall compass the city seven times, and the priests shall blow with the trumpets. And it shall come to pass, that when they make a long blast with the ram's horn, and when ye hear the sound of the trumpet, all the people shall shout with a great shout; and the wall of the city shall fall down flat, and the people shall ascend up every man straight before him.”

I chose to begin this paper with a biblical passage for it has always struck me as a historian that the world in which we live is filled with the echoes of past events, some of which reverberate all the way back to the very first books of the Hebrew bible. These biblical echoes were often deliberate as, up until quite recently, the one and only book that most Americans and Europeans were

assured of knowing was the bible. Thus, when a well-known historical precedent was needed the bible was the obvious choice, for the western world it was, until recently, the common reference point: Christendom's Encyclopedia Britanica, Wikipedia, and Google Search all rolled into one, and yet it was more than that. As Danny Danziger observed, in his lovely book on England in the year 1000AD, the bible provided to earlier generations a vivid array of characters and events that had an appeal to the wider population akin to a modern soap opera. Biblical heroes and villains were the first celebrities whose lives were as well known as the most prominent inhabitants of modern Hollywood. One needed, for example, only to witness the roughest carving of a stable and the whole story of Christmas would be brought to mind, while a religious statue adorned with a set with keys would immediately recall the life of St Peter. And so it also was with Jericho, one only had to mention the name of that city and the listener or reader would think of what happened when the Jewish people walked round its perimeter blowing their trumpets and the walls came tumbling down.

Indeed, the power of the Jericho story found its echo down through the centuries, inspiring art and music, tv shows, military operations, and plenty of place names. There are, according to one source, 41 localities in the Continental United States with the name Jericho including, of course, one in Butler county. Scouring various maps, I found a Jericho road, but oddly not an actual Jericho, 8261 miles south of Cincinnati on New Zealand's north island. One Jericho I can urge you to visit is in Oxford, England where the more bohemian students, destined for stellar careers in politics, finance and the law can be found drinking single-origin coffee beans and debating the correct pronunciation of Quinoa.

Of course, as Jericho seeped out into the names of places it also seeped out into the names of songs. One of my favourite African American spirituals is called "Joshua fought the battle of Jericho" with its proud declaration "You may

talk about your men of Gideon, You may talk about your men of Saul, But there's none like good old Joshua, And the battle of Jericho.” It was not just, however, African-Americans who found in this earlier biblical miracle a promise that their own walls, walls of slavery, walls of oppression, would also come tumbling down.

It is also the case that the bible, particularly the old testament, served not only as an inspiration for the hopeful and the faithful, but also provided a larger narrative that appealed to hard-headed and modern-minded men and women, even of an atheist disposition, who also sought their own Joshua and their own Jericho-like miracle. For example, the story the Old Testament is, essentially, the story of the Jewish people, a chosen people, who endured a multitude of trials and tribulations but always had their promised land, and that story is the clear inspiration for all modern nationalists. No matter which nationalist history you read, I assure you three things will always be stressed – the distinctiveness of a particular nation, the tribulations it has endured, and the contours of the particular land that it, and it alone, rightfully possesses. It is, therefore, entirely fitting that it was, I suggest, a blend of nationalism and religion that really brought down those modern walls of Jericho, erected by the communist regimes that governed eastern Europe after 1945 and which finally ‘fell down flat’ in 1989, liberating one hundred million people in the region from the pettily brutal dictatorships in which they had been ensconced since the second world war.

Permit me a small digression to explain my use of the term “eastern Europe”. Germans call the region “mitteleuropa” or middle Europe but that sounds too Tolkien-esque, and reminiscent of middle earth. Thus “eastern Europe” became the typical Anglophone expression until the people of the region objected on the grounds that it made them sound remote when, as they are fond of pointing out, Prague is west of Vienna, and both Warsaw and Zagreb are closer to London than Rome and Madrid. Hence, I am officially titled a “lecturer in Central

European history” to avoid giving offence. Nevertheless, as my paper this evening concerns the end of the communist dictatorships which sliced Europe into two halves, free and unfree, East and West, I think the term Eastern Europe is appropriate.

Its not only the naming of things that is tricky, the whole topic of what happened in 1989 gets more complicated the more one looks at it. For one thing, not all communist regimes and communist walls collapsed in that annus mirabilis. China, Cuba and Vietnam’s communist one-party states all survived the year intact and unapologetic whereas every communist regime in eastern Europe was gone by the end of December. Some dominoes fell and some dominoes kept on standing.

Some of my colleagues believe that a wider, subtler revolution was taking place in 1989, the year when Microsoft Windows was first launched on the market, Tim Berners-Lee drew up a blueprint for a truly World Wide Web, the Iranian Ayatollah launched a new era of Islamic Terrorism by issuing a fatwa calling for the murder of the British author Salman Rushdie, and Denmark became the first country in the world to legalize same-sex marriages but if you can come up with a persuasive theory to connect these seemingly disparate events, there is a guest lecture slot and probably a book contract waiting for you. At my university in London we devote an entire year-long course to understanding 1989 and the students usually end up even more confused at the end than they did at the beginning. I do hope my paper this evening will not produce a similar effect.

When I teach on the topic I always start by explaining how foreboding and how permanent those walls which cut off eastern Europe appeared to be. They were already there in 1946 when Winston Churchill, seeking solace from his unexpected election defeat in 1945, travelled across America to Fulton

Missouri, and proclaimed the famous lines that “from Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the Continent.” Behind that curtain, he continued “lie all the capitals of the ancient states of Central and Eastern Europe. Warsaw, Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade, Bucharest and Sofia, all these famous cities and the populations around them lie in what I must call the Soviet sphere” and a very grim sphere it was.

On the western edge of Czechoslovakia, a false border was erected about half a mile inland from the actual international border. Those Czechs and Slovaks who successfully crossed the three sets of barbed wire fences, the searchlights and machine gun towers overlooking the automatic ‘death zone’, the barking dogs and the patches of minefield, as well as the constant patrols of specially selected, privileged and ruthless border guards, found themselves welcomed by a guard post flying the American flag and replete with coca cola, western cigarettes, and fluent English speakers. The escapers were made to feel warm and welcome as they were asked to explain how precisely they had managed to escape to the West. Only after they had fully revealed their methods, and their helpers, did the guards switch to Czech and inform them that they were under arrest and would be promptly returned to Prague for intensive interrogation.

We still do not have the complete numbers of all those who were killed trying to escape the communist dictatorships, let alone the numbers who were arrested, intimidated and psychologically broken by the impossibility of ever leaving the paradise of the proletariat. The case of Peter Fechter, who in 1962 tried to cross the “Anti-Fascist Protection Wall” as the Iron Curtain was called in East Berlin, is illustrative. Aged 18, he managed in an extraordinary dash for freedom to reach the final, two-metre high, wall separating him from West Germany before he was shot in the pelvis. With no assistance able to be

provided from the West and none forthcoming from the East German border guards, he spent his final hour screaming for help in the afternoon sun, in the heart of what is now the German capital's shopping district.

These communist walls not only kept their people in, they kept ideas out. A leading British academic was arrested for smuggling bibles into Bratislava, another had to wait two years for an entry visa, a third was so nervous when he visited that years later he had nightmares about communist policeman arresting him in his hotel room. And they were the lucky ones who, at least back home in London, could read whatever they wanted and write whatever they wished. On one of my visits to the Hungarian National Library, perched in the old royal palace that the Habsburgs built but never used, on the top of Castle Hill, I was handed a catalogue of all the libraries holdings that, between 1945 and 1989, required 'a special permit' to access. Hundreds of pages of neatly typed book titles that no reader was ever allowed to find on the bookshelves and only a narrow coterie of party loyalists were ever permitted to browse through or scrutinize. Some of these books were obviously scurrilous and deserve to come with a mental health warning: Mein Kampf, Mussolini's edited speeches, various anti-Semitic conspiracy theories were all there listed in black and white type. Most of the other books in this catalogue, which had been stripped from the bookshelves of all Hungarian libraries, were, however, banned for the sole reason that their ideas were different from that of the governing communist party. Books by and about American presidents, British prime ministers, nationalist histories, papal encyclicals, George Orwell's 1984, the list appeared endless. I should also add that there was apparently a separate catalogue for banned pornography which I prudently avoided asking to look at, and there was probably another one for banned art works which I never got round to asking for because the first catalogue of banned political and historical texts, I found to be both engrossing and exhausting.

Yes, people could get their news and alternative viewpoints from the BBC or Radio Free Europe and various other long wave western radio stations. Heck the family that gave me a room in southern Hungary in 1991 were more knowledgeable about some British and American radio programmes than I was. It is also true that placing limits on knowledge created a thirst for knowledge. If a play by any foreigner was ever performed in communist east Europe it would invariably be a sell-out as people thirsted for a rhetorical alternative to the repetitive and increasingly leaden language of revolutionary Marxism. Likewise, all of the literary classics which could not be banned, the plays of Moliere, the novels of Thomas Mann, sold in huge numbers, because they offered in their own limited and dated way a different way of seeing the world, of visiting 18<sup>th</sup> century Paris or 19<sup>th</sup> century London when actually visiting either of those cities during the cold war was essentially impossible. The thirst for knowledge produced some extraordinary results. As the novelist Bruce Chatwin observed about Prague in the 1980s, “where else would one find...a tram-ticket salesman who was a scholar of the Elizabethan stage? Or a street-sweeper who had writtens a philosophical commentary on the Anaximander Fragment?” Reflecting on this thirst for knowledge, Chatwin reflected that “Marx’s vision of an age of infinite leisure had, in one sense, come true. The State, in its efforts to wipe out ‘traces of individualism’, offered limitless time for the intelligent individual to dream his private and heretical thoughts.”

It is also true that some parts of Eastern Europe were more closed off than others. In Communist Romania, the population was actively warned against any socialization with foreigners and all typewriters had to be registered with the authorities in order to facilitate that tracing of any typewritten criticism of the regime. Elsewhere, however, at least in the capital cities major hotels were constructed to attract hard currency-paying tourists. They even got their own shops they could use which provided such necessities as soft toilet paper,

tampons and Johnny Walker whisky that were unavailable in the stores open to the wider population. These foreign currency stores could also be used by the party elite, the nomenklatura, literally “the names on the list”, everyone else had to make do with the local hooch and the priorities determined by state planning.

Television also helped ideas circumvent the walls. In East Germany televisions could easily be tuned into to the nearby West German transmitter, broadcasting in a language everyone understood. Elsewhere, western television was harder to access geographically and linguistically. American films were occasionally shown in Eastern Europe if the ever busy censors were convinced that Hollywood was portraying capitalist countries in a negative light, sometimes with surprising results. *On The Waterfront* was supposed to be a lacerating portrayal of capitalist employment practices, while *Rebel without a Cause* was supposed to highlight the immorality of American youth, instead it inspired hero worship of western fashion, James Dean and Marlon Brando.

It wasn't just Eastern Europe, growing up in Britain my school friends were invariably smitten by the portrayals of American evident even when watching crime dramas – the cars, the clothes and the perpetual sunshine brightened their lives and made them yearn to visit Miami, New York and California. It was the same in Eastern Europe, where the fundamental desire to taste the West was only exacerbated by its inaccessibility. Portrayals of the soviet union just could not compete

Televisions, radios, and tourists helped ensure the walls were always partially porous, and the flow of information never quite dried up, even in Albania where, in a desperate bid for maximum isolation, all international railway border crossings were ripped up and the beaches were dotted with pillboxes. Nevertheless, as the head of the family I stayed with in Hungary, an avid listener to the BBC world service and a respected academic who built

Hungary's first solar-powered house, explained to me, even in relatively tolerant Hungary, "the happiest barracks in the Soviet block", he had always made sure to keep the volume low when he listened to foreign radio stations, just to ensure that the neighbours never knew what he was up to. That was how it worked with these particular walls, they made people feel small and frightened just for listening to the radio. Even after communism collapsed, I watched as the people who sat opposite me on an international train, flinched and sucked in their words as we stopped at the border and the armed guards barked out their demand: 'čestovný pas, útlelevel, passport!'

It was this demeaning of people, of treating the population with contempt that had built these modern walls of Jericho. It is no surprise therefore that that Pope John Paul II honed in on that contempt when he offered his damning critique of the communist dictatorships on his first visit to his homeland after his election as pontiff. Dignity, he explained in fluent Polish, was what, above all else, people needed. He knew, of course, what he was talking about. As the former bishop of Cracow he knew that Poles were formally able to go to church if they wished, but they went nervously, worried that it would be held against them when they applied for a job, or a loan, or a flat from the local housing committee. Sometimes, a policeman would stand on the steps of the church before mass, occasionally noting down names – one never knew if he would be there or not so you had to assume he would be. In East Germany, and probably elsewhere, they wiretapped the confessionals. Everywhere there were cases of monastic orders dissolved, church properties confiscated, and clergymen arrested, beaten, tortured or corrupted.

*At number 60 Andrassy Avenue, the grandest and one of the busiest avenues in Budapest, the lower floors of the building were used first by the fascist and then by the communist secret police in the 1940s and 50s as an interrogation centre for its most high profile victims, while the upper floors*

*continued to be rented out as accommodation. It is now a museum called the House of Terror. There in the basement they put the head of the Catholic Church in Hungary, Cardinal Mindszenty, into one of their cells. Visiting, I still found the atmosphere unbearable and escaped outside after a few minutes for fresh air, he was in there for months.*

Yes, most churches were allowed to stay open but in reality, it was the poor and the elderly who tended to go to Church, or the few surviving synagogues, as they had nothing to lose. The ambitious and the nervous stayed away, I sometimes wonder what I would have done. Indeed, the whole culture of communist eastern Europe was characterized by people choosing to keep quiet when they wanted to speak or forced to speak when they wanted to remain quiet. Ultimately, most people learned how to publicly conform to the system and privately despise it. As the great Czech dissident Vaclav Havel put it, the people had learned to “live within a lie” and as the ancient world and the ancient myths always made clear, without *veritas* there could be no *dignitas*.

Indeed, what was more undignified than to be told that, unless you were one of the favoured party elite, the walls on the western edge of your country could never be crossed, the state decided even where you went on holiday. Usually, people just got on with having their holidays in their home country, at the local lake or middling seaside resort – it certainly helped that these were usually subsidized, but every once in a while the walls loomed large again.

A chemical engineer I know went on a cycling holiday through southeastern Germany that was interrupted by the police when, without warning, he strayed too close to the border. I also heard of a Czech girl who had learnt English remarkably fluently without ever having met a native speaker. In 1988 she applied to the local party committee for permission to travel to London to do some research on Shakesperian plays. The committee turned her

request down. She could read the Bard's work in Prague and, they informed her, perhaps after she eventually retired her request to travel abroad would be viewed more favourably. Academics from eastern Europe could travel, usually alone, to international conferences but they also had to come back when instructed. One of them, the world expert on medieval Bohemia, had to return home to work every Monday as a tram driver, punishment for joining the calls for reform, the Prague Spring, in 1968. By the way, Emil Zatopek, one of the greatest runners of all time, who won gold medals at the 1948 and 1952 olympics, was punished for the same offence by being sent to work in a coal mine. When the Pope spoke of dignity he was speaking not only of the right to go to Catholic Mass, he was also speaking about the broader right of eastern europeans to stop living, what Paul Betts calls a life "within walls".

*In 1970, Polish shipyard workers protested against the government's decision to raise the price of foodstuffs without any corresponding rise in wages. As the strike grew, the militia intervened and shot eight shipyard workers dead. Ten years later, Anna Walentynowicz went to the site of the massacre of her colleagues and lit candles in their memory, she was immediately sacked by the management. In response, the workers in Gdansk launched a new strike, formed their own trade union, Solidarity, and forced the government first to negotiate, then to concede, then to impose martial law as one in four polish adults joined the new trade union. In that brief moment from 1980 to 1981, when dignity seemed possible, even the ski instructors in the mountains south of Cracow formed their own trade union branch.*

It was not only the desire for dignity and freedom that bubbled along beneath the surface, a pride in the nation was also there usually hidden but never absent. Clever academics have always been prone to dismissing nationalism as a temporary phenomenon. Talk of nations seems, especially in the academic halls where I work, to be wrapped up in myths, and if there is one

thing most academics seem to delight in, its dispelling myths with cold, hard facts, preferably footnoted. Such dismissiveness, however, misses one critical point – myths endure far longer than academics. Between 1945 and 1989 nationalism appeared to have disappeared across much of Eastern Europe. Admittedly not everywhere, (there were some curious cases of ‘national Bolshevism’), but generally nationalism was downplayed and even criminalized. Quite a few eastern Europeans communists were, for example, purged, arrested and even executed for being “bourgeoise nationalists.”

Internationalism, which really meant subservience to the Soviet Union, was also obligatory. Leading politicians all made their trips to Moscow (even when in Marshal Tito’s case he feared assassination), fraternal organizations were established, streets were named after (appropriate) Soviet composers or writers, Russian was the compulsory second language in all schools across the region, and the conquest of the region by the Soviet empire was rebranded ‘liberation’ and repeatedly celebrated. Old national feuds, in contrast, were never mentioned. For example, when the Romanian government proposed the demolition in the 1980s of one thousand villages populated by the awkward Hungarian minority in Transylvania, the government in Budapest raised no objection – that would have gone against the mantra of internationalism.

Whenever, however, Moscow’s grip broke and the walls shook, nationalism re-emerged with a vengeance. In 1956, revolutionaries on the streets of Budapest first marched to a monument to the 1848 revolution against Habsburg rule and then they tore the red stars out of their flags. A rather mild-mannered librarian who joined the revolution, recounted at a conference I attended how he had leaned out of a window and thrown a grenade into a soviet tank. He didn’t want to kill those boys, he explained, but he had to defend his country.

In 1989, all over the region, the same rituals of national rebellion took place. At the statues to national heroes, the crowds flew nationalist flags, sang nationalist anthems, and demanded national freedom. In Berlin the rebellious crowds first expropriated the old socialist slogan, “wir sind das volk” (we are the people) and then switched it to “wir sind ein volk” (we are one people) as they expressed their support for national unification. 1989 in eastern Europe was about reclaiming the dignity of the person but it was also about reclaiming the dignity of the nation. That is why the current prime minister of Hungary, Victor Orban, became instantaneously famous in 1989 when he declared, in his first ever public speech at a reburial of some of those executed after the 1956 revolution, “Russians go home!” – that is nationalism resurgent!

Most of my students start off understanding very little of this. Nationalism seems as awkward a topic to them as it does to most of my colleagues. My university promotes itself as a ‘global university’ that ‘celebrates diversity’ and where more than half of the student body were born or raised outside the UK. The idea that, in Hungary, the revolutionaries of 1848 could inspire the revolutionaries of 1956 who, in turn, inspired the protests in 1989 seems to them absurd.

*Orban, however, knew his nationalist history. He knew that Soviet/Russian forces had invaded the country in 1956, killing over ten thousand Hungarians and driving almost three hundred thousand into exile, he knew that Soviet/Russian forces had invaded Hungary in 1944 paving the way for the communist takeover, and he knew that Russian forces had invaded Hungary in 1849 to put down the earlier revolution. 1989 was about the promise of freedom, dignity and progress, but it was also about tapping into a deep-rooted nationalist currents that always needs to be taken seriously.*

Religion appears equally foreign to many of my students. When I recount a trip I took one Sunday morning over the Carpathian mountains after communism collapsed, passing through village after village where the locals were literally standing in line to get into the overflowing churches, I felt their disbelief – in London most of the churches have become little more than monuments to an earlier age of faith now replaced by an age of secularism and decadence. For a while, I even ran a course that was designed, in part, to familiarize some of the students with what the inside of a traditional church and synagogue actually looked like – and why. I would march them off every Thursday to a religious building near my university armed with a questionnaire filled with questions such as “why do altars in churches traditionally point east?” or “what is stored in the ark of a synagogue?” Generally, the students would get about half of such questions right, which pleased them immensely and left me contemplating early retirement.

For most of these go-getter students, in truth neither biblical references nor nationalist sentiments are obvious frames of reference. Instead, they invariably prefer economic explanations, as if they remain in awe of Clintonian cynicism and James Carville’s much-quoted aphorism “it’s the economy, stupid!” Like every well-worn falsehood, this too contains a kernel of truth. Economic conditions in Eastern Europe were dismal. The historian Ivan Berend, who in 1989 swapped his role as advisor to the Hungarian Communist Party for a plum professorship at Berkeley persuasively argued, in a series of lectures that he gave in Oxford in the 1980s, that Eastern Europe was what he called “the crisis zone” because it had always lagged the West. Each aggressive ideology, utopian liberalism, intolerant nationalism, wild-eyed fascism, Marxist totalitarianism, and ultimately even the dissidents dreaming of freedom were all, he argued, desperate attempts to catch up with the West.

Indeed, as China has perhaps demonstrated, a population can be quite happy with a one-party state as long it provides rapid and tangible growth alongside a resumption in national pride. None of the regimes in eastern Europe had, however, the skills of the men in Beijing. Having shifted most of their peasants into the cities in the 1950s in a cheap, rushed and inefficient form of industrialization, all they had left was budget deficits and Soviet subsidies. As their economies began to lag so too did their political legitimacy.

Even an old Marxist like Berend, however, had to concede that economic backwardness was just one cause and one symptom of a much deeper and deeply-aggrieved sense of backwardness that stemmed as much from historical tragedy as economic farce. Moreover, seen from within Eastern Europe in the 1980s the Communist regimes were actually doing considerably better than they had been in the 1960s let alone the pre-communist era. I should add that much of eastern Europe is still relatively poor compared to the West but there is zero appetite for another round of revolutions. Even to the extent economic frustration mattered, I suspect it was the undignified expectation that one would have to stand in line for hours to buy anything decent, the knowledge that an arrogant elite decided what would and would not be sold, the frustration that the walls could not be crossed even for a spot of window shopping that frustrated people more than the size of their country's GDP.

It was that frustration, driven by a sense that life, and the dignity of life, was limited, which finally brought the communist regimes' walls tumbling down. Just as in Jericho where I imagine the city's defenders watching on bemused as the people of Israel processed around the walls, so too the communist elites appeared absolutely secure behind the walls of their one-party parliaments and complimentary villas. Even in the West, plenty of academics who should have known better dismissed any possibility that the walls would soon be falling. There was one esteemed expert on Russian and Soviet history at

my university who suggested, in 1988, that my department should change its name from *The School of Slavonic Studies* to *the School of Soviet Studies*, on the grounds that it was about time that we all recognized that the Soviet Union was a fact that was not going to disappear – I am very pleased that his proposal was voted down. When Ronald Reagan, in contrast, dismissed the Soviet Union as an “evil empire” and called on its leader from Berlin, “Mr Gorbachev, tear down this wall” he was promptly denounced as absurdly naïve! In fact he was surrounded by a phenomenal array of sharp-minded advisers, proved himself a skilled negotiator, and, with his unshakeable belief in freedom, presciently sensed what plenty of clever observers missed.

It is also appropriate that the first permanent breach came in Hungary. It was there that the revolutionaries in 1956 had briefly ripped the iron curtain asunder and though that brief taste of freedom was stamped out by a ruthless Soviet intervention that left ten thousand dead on the streets of Budapest, the legacy mattered. In the latter part of the 1980s a new generation of Hungarian communists, men who appear to have cynically joined the party in the 1960s and 70s not because they agreed with the party, (almost no-one did after they saw what it, and its allies had done in 1956), but because it offered the best career prospects. In the 1980s these men finally began to move into leadership positions and were able to carry out a programme of reform from above. Private businesses were permitted so long as they had no more than one employee, The British Prime Minister Mrs Thatcher, renowned as a high priestess of privatization, was invited to visit Budapest and promptly went to the central market in Budapest to meet the stallholders who were now allowed to keep their meagre profits rather than handing them over to an agricultural cooperative in return for a dismal wage and three weeks of holiday by a local lake. Political reforms then followed. As was the case in Poland, in 1988 opposition groups were permitted to form as long as they didn't call themselves political parties,

censorship was gradually eased, the 1956 ‘counter-revolution’ was symbolically renamed a ‘popular uprising’ and in the summer of 1989 the Hungarian foreign minister held what he called a “pan-european picnic” with his Austrian counterpart at their mutual border where they cut open the barbed wire with a large pair of bolt cutters.

That set off a wave of other east Europeans determined to get to Hungary, many of whom pretended to be taking their holidays at Lake Balaton, Europe’s largest freshwater lake and a popular Hungarian tourist destination. When that particular ruse was blocked, East Europeans tried scrambling over the walls of embassies while their governments wondered whether they needed to erect new walls to seal off Hungary and the Soviet leader Gorbachev urged further reforms to reduce popular discontent. We still don’t know when exactly, but some time in 1989 it became clear that the Soviet Union had neither the means or the motive to intervene on behalf of its communist allies in the region. It had done so in 1956 in Hungary and 1968 in Czechoslovakia and the result had been a PR disaster. The same happened with the ill-fated invasion of Afghanistan which led to international condemnation and seemingly endless guerrilla war. Gorbachev wanted no repeat, and could not afford a repeat in eastern European, especially when oil prices were in a slump and the Soviet economy was plunging into crisis.

With the discontented unable to leave and their governments dithering about reform, the pressure mounted as the year wore on. Among those trying to get to the West were a growing number of East Germans, some of whom had begun to march on the streets of Leipzig and then Berlin calling for change. Pastors and priests offered moral encouragement, churches became the starting points of protest marches.

Germany and above all Berlin was always likely to be the epicentre of the escalating tensions just as it had been the epicentre of the entire cold war. Right there, in Imperial Germany's capital city, the two visions of society, communist and capitalist stood glaring at each other. Two competing opera houses, two competing symphonies, two competing models of society which the international journalists flocked to visit, the perfect place to compare and contrast the clashing ideologies. Just as West Germany was the showcase for all that the West had on offer, East Germany was seen as the Soviet showcase; richer than anywhere else (it got higher subsidies) and harder than anywhere else.

There the walls, grim and foreboding, ran not through remote countryside but through the heart of the metropolis; and it was there in East Germany that the forces tasked with maintaining the wall were more extensive and more feared than anywhere else in Eastern Europe. East Germany's infamous Stasi secret police had, for example, grown so large that its operating costs consumed two percent of the entire state budget and its network of operatives and informers had had built up dossiers on 6 million East Germans out of a total population of only seventeen million. These dossiers, it is claimed, contain more documentation than had been produced in all of German history from the middle ages to 1945. It was the largest employer in the country, had its own banking system (with some accounts so secret that even finance ministers were unaware of their existence), numerous departments, such as recreation, housing and catering, and was the largest employer in the entire country. Its 91, 000 full time agents, as Paul Betts notes, translated, to "roughly one operative for every 180 citizens. By comparison, there was one secret police officer per 595 citizens in the USSR, and one in 1,574 in Poland [while] the Third Reich's notorious Gestapo, by contrast, had only 7,000 employees in a population of sixty-six million." It is also worth noting that the Stasi was only one of the repressive

security forces employed by East Germany which included the Volkspolizei, Army Intelligence, and an extensive Berlin-based Soviet intelligence apparatus headed, in its last years, by a certain Comrade Vladimir Putin. If all this could not maintain the walls that had created and preserved eastern European communism, nothing could. If they fell flat there, they could and they would fall flat everywhere, and on 9 November, 1989 they fell and in a stroke the Stasi was rendered powerless.

That evening, a rather dull spokesman for the East German government, Gunter Schwabowski, tried to stem the outflow to Hungary and the West by announcing that travel westwards would be permitted via Berlin “immediately”; by which he merely meant that applications for travel visas would be granted more swiftly and more generously to those who wished to travel westwards. It was another half-gesture from a regime that had cloaked itself in half-truths and false promises for almost half a century. But this time it deliciously backfired. Misunderstanding what had been announced, West German television reported that the Berlin Wall had finally been opened, and a further half an hour after this piece of fake news, east Berliners (many of whom got their news from west German television), began to flock to the wall, at which point the border guards panicked and disappeared into the night. Peacefully, East and West Germans helped each other climb onto and over the walls, sitting, singing, triumphant. There was even the modern equivalent of Joshua’s trumpets, as car horns blared out in welcome celebration as, helped by enthusiastically wielded sledgehammers, the walls finally came tumbling down. Now that’s what I call a miracle!