

## After the wall fell

Пише: Anne Applebaum  
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BERLIN -- For some time now, I've been trying to put my finger on what has been bothering me about the exhaustive and perfectly blameless celebrations of the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. There is nothing wrong with holding dozens of conferences, after all, and I'm all in favor of the many new books. In Washington, German Chancellor Angela Merkel addressed a joint meeting of Congress. In Los Angeles, a fabulously kitschy "Wall" was constructed and then [knocked down](#) by "invited dignitaries" (although, in deference to the habits of the natives, the timing of that event had to be changed from afternoon to midnight, so as not to disrupt L.A. traffic).

Here in Berlin, there are conferences, books and dignitaries in abundance: Everyone who is anyone is in town, from Mikhail Gorbachev to Hillary Clinton, and plenty of kitsch is in evidence as well. A Berlin culture committee has set up a "long line of oversize dominoes" -- painted in graffiti-style designs -- that also will be knocked down, [symbolizing](#) "the power of people to bring change." Traffic doesn't pose the cosmic problem in Berlin that it does in Los Angeles, so this event was scheduled to take place during working hours.

Myself, I celebrated the anniversary Sunday, on the day before the great events, simply by doing something that would have been impossible on Nov. 8, 1989: I walked down Unter den Linden -- a street I first visited on a freezing cold day back when it was still the dark and deserted centerpiece of East Berlin -- and through the Brandenburg Gate, which once stood stranded in the no man's land between East and West. I passed people sitting in cafes, eating lunch, window shopping. And I thought about what an extraordinary, almost unbelievable success it has all been.

This view -- that the past two decades have been, in a friend's words, the "best in Central Europe for 300 years" -- is not universal. On the contrary, the majority of those books and conferences have focused on the many unsolved problems, the mistakes that were made and the resentments that are still felt all across the former Eastern bloc. The majority of the news focus -- in Germany, Poland and Hungary, as well as in the United States -- has been on the persistence of Eastern poverty, on the perception of Western indifference, on the "invisible walls" that still divide people.

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But what did we think Central Europe would look like 20 years after Nov. 9, 1989? I can promise you, having been in Berlin then myself, that no one had the slightest idea. Angela Merkel herself has said that she thought it was ridiculous even to speculate on the possibility of a united Germany, so absurd did that idea seem -- even after the fall of the wall. Indeed, so outlandish did the notion of NATO expansion seem that when officials in the new democratic government of Poland first raised the idea, American diplomats in Warsaw angrily told them to forget about it.

Back then, most of those who did make predictions saw a dark future. The rise of virulent, angry nationalism was forecast by more than one expert. Others foresaw the rise of anti-Semitism and the growth of neo-Nazism; Germany was going to become "the Fourth Reich." Many in the West protested, preemptively, against the "witch hunts" that might be conducted against former communists. Now that he is a revered symbol of freedom, nobody remembers that the Polish Solidarity leader, Lech Walesa, was tapped as a potential right-wing demagogue, too.

Some truly awful things did happen: In Yugoslavia there was a bitter war. In Russia, revanchism has returned. Authoritarian dictators run several of the former Soviet republics. But the heart of Central Europe -- Germany, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, the Baltic states, Romania and Bulgaria -- is peaceful and democratic. More than that: The inhabitants of Central Europe are healthier, more prosperous and more integrated with the rest of the continent than they have been for centuries.

This, then, is what I think was bothering me about the commemorations: Too many of them treat too much of the past two decades as a foregone conclusion, focusing on what didn't happen rather than what did. Too many have taken the achievements for granted. Too many of us forget that there are few historical precedents for the past two decades. "Bliss it was in that dawn to be alive, but to be young was very heaven." When Wordsworth wrote those words about the French Revolution, the post-revolutionary terror was a recent memory, the Napoleonic wars were still raging and his poem was an ironic comment on the naivete of youth. But we are now as far from the events of 1989 as Wordsworth was from 1789, and here in Central Europe there is no need for irony at all: Bliss it was in that dawn to be alive, but to be young was very heaven.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/11/08/AR2009110817809.html>