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The Walls of August

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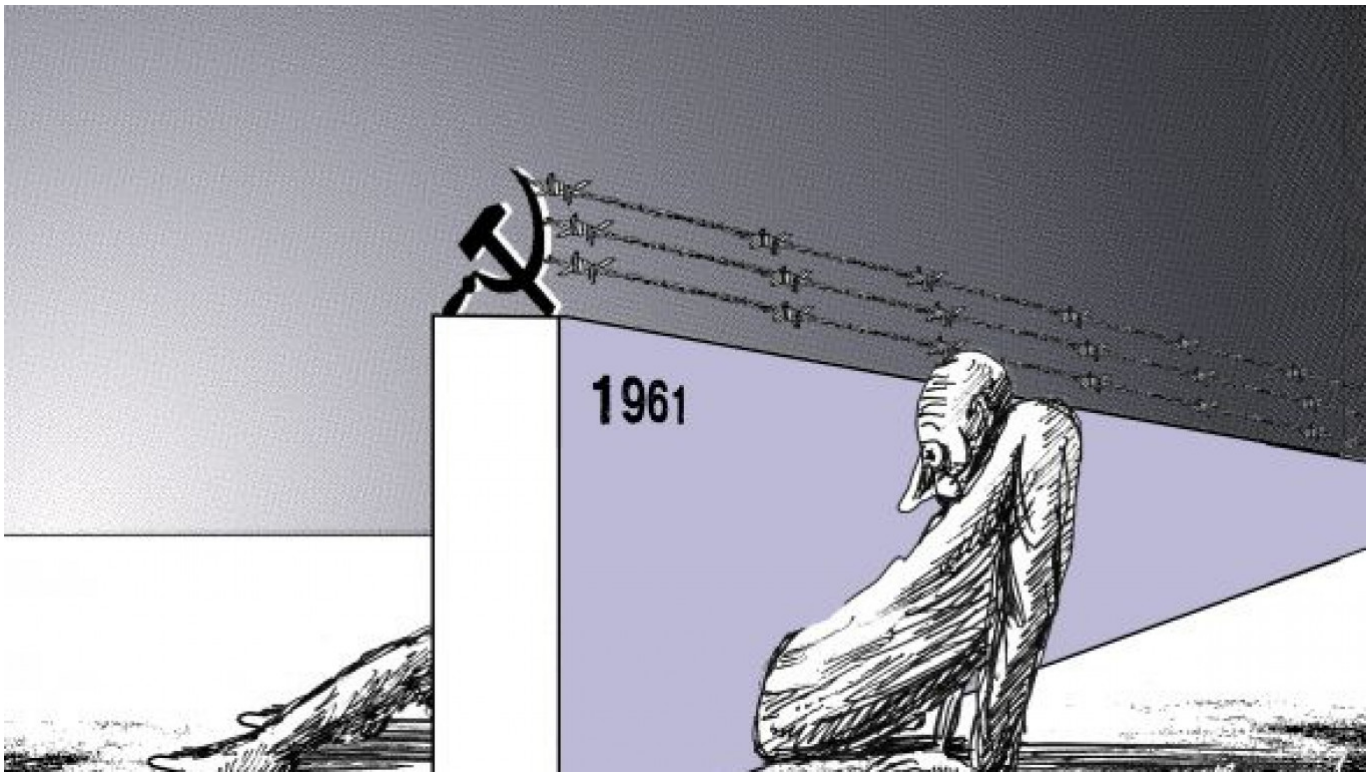

History's milestones are rarely so neatly arrayed as they are this summer. Fifty years ago this month, the Berlin Wall was born. After some hesitation, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev allowed his East German counterpart, Walter Ulbricht, to erect a barrier between East and West Berlin in order to ensure the survival of communism in the entire Soviet bloc. By that point, East Germany had hemorrhaged 3 million people, including many of its most talented, as hundreds each day peacefully walked into the zones of Berlin that were controlled by the United States, Britain and France.

And 20 years ago this week, hard-liners in the Soviet government attempted to overthrow Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, who, two years after U.S. President Ronald Reagan memorably called on him to "tear down this wall," did just that. Somewhat miraculously, a reformer who wanted Russians to be part of the democratic West had come to power in the Kremlin.

Gorbachev's hard-line Politburo adversaries, like those who had hemmed in Khrushchev at the time of the Berlin Wall's construction, were determined to preserve the decrepit system that the wall symbolized. But in August 1991, ordinary Muscovites stood their ground. They

defied the coup makers, and in the end carried with them much of the Russian Army. With their defiance, the coup was doomed.

Berliners never stood a similar chance in the face of Soviet power. Khrushchev had assented to Ulbricht's plea that only a physical barrier would maintain the viability of the East German state. Khrushchev's response was reminiscent of how he dealt with the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, a time when he was just consolidating his rule and needed to keep Kremlin hard-liners at bay.

But five years after the brutal suppression of the demands for freedom heard in Budapest, Khrushchev was not fully convinced of the need to divide Berlin. He feared that his policy of improved relations with Western Europe would be destroyed in the process and that U.S. President John F. Kennedy would view the wall as the first provocative step in a confrontation that could lead to nuclear war.

Khrushchev had placed enormous hope in the Soviet Union's ability to build more positive relations with Europe, particularly after the U-2 spy plane incident in 1960, when U.S. pilot Gary Powers was shot down over Soviet territory, had poisoned relations with the United States. While his summit with Kennedy in Vienna earlier in 1961 had done nothing to improve the situation, erecting the wall on Aug. 13 seemed to him a purely defensive act, not a show of force.

Khrushchev was considering his own political fortunes as well. Ever since his 1956 secret speech denouncing Stalin's cult of personality, his position within the Politburo had weakened, his support among the Kremlin leadership was shallow, and hard-liners sniped at him from every direction. In the end, the decision to build the wall was a desperate bid both to secure the continuation of Communist rule in East Germany and to appease his detractors.

Brinkmanship of the sort that took place as the wall went up is usually the product of a politician desperate to shore up his domestic position. The irony for Khrushchev was that, though the hard-liners wanted the wall, they later included his indecisiveness about the wall on the charge sheet used to force his removal in 1964. His decision preserved Soviet rule in East Germany for decades but contributed to his own political demise.

When Gorbachev allowed the wall to be breached and then demolished, he alienated the bulk of the Communist Party even more than Khrushchev had. Indeed, Gorbachev once told me how Romania's dictator, Nicolae Ceausescu, called him to request that tanks be sent into Berlin to preserve the wall.

But Gorbachev, though still a believer in communism, refused to maintain the Soviet empire at the barrel of a gun. His was a brinkmanship very different from Khrushchev's. He was daring the West to recognize and accept that the Soviet Union had truly changed. In a conversation with then-U.S. Secretary of State James Baker, Gorbachev took issue with the U.S. side, which constantly referred to the "Western values of freedom." Gorbachev insisted that these were "human values."

By the time the West came to believe that Gorbachev and his reforms were genuine, resentment among his Kremlin colleagues was boiling over. The coup leaders of August 1991 viewed Gorbachev's ouster the same way Ulbricht had regarded his demand for the wall — as

the only means to preserve communist rule.

When the West tried to warn Gorbachev that a coup was coming, it was already too late. But ordinary Russians' sudden, unexpected defense of their newfound freedoms, together with the putschists' sheer incompetence, defeated the effort to restore totalitarian rule.

Had the wall not been built in 1961, would communism have collapsed sooner? Had Gorbachev responded to Ceausescu's plea and sent troops to defend the wall, would communism in Europe ever have collapsed?

These are unanswerable questions. And given that Gorbachev refused to use force anywhere to preserve the Soviet's East European empire, the idea that he would do so to preserve the wall seems preposterous. What does seem clear is that in the end no wall can hold back democracy. Conversely, if a country's people don't want democracy enough, no Berlin Wall is needed to keep it out. The world has Prime Minister Vladimir Putin to thank for that lesson.

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