

November 9th from the Russian Point of View

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There were unending discussions among smaller groups in Russia before and during the perestroika period (“in the kitchen” as these discussions were aptly called at that time), many of which were increasingly carried on in the public sphere. However, the Berlin Wall was not the subject of any of them. Very few Russians had any idea what the Berlin Wall actually was. That also applied to millions of Soviet citizens who performed their military service as members of the group of the Soviet military forces in Germany (there were almost 10 million in the 40 years that East Germany existed). For most people, the Berlin Wall was nothing but a “normal” border where firearms were used sometimes just like at any other border. The reformers - and they were the absolute majority of the population of the USSR - thought all borders, including the Berlin Wall, had to stop being something akin to the “Iron Curtain”.

Russians have always been people that enjoy travelling, which is why there was this massive demand for eliminating the extremely strict border regime in the USSR (or at least liberalising it radically). In this sense, there was no disagreement between the mood of the Berliners and the Muscovites. The desire to make all borders permeable was something that brought the East Germans and Russians together. Where they differed was the fact that the Germans were willing to go out on the street for it and the Russians were not yet (the first major street demonstration in East Germany was on June 8, 1987 on the large Unter den Linden Boulevard in Berlin with cries of “the wall has to go!”).

The Berlin Wall had become a foreign-policy liability for the political leadership in Moscow. When the president of the United States Ronald Reagan stood at the Brandenburg Gate and said “Mr. Gorbachev, open this Gate! Tear down this Wall!” on June 12, 1987, he was barking up the wrong tree. If it had been up to

Mikhail Gorbachev, the Berlin Wall would have been long gone. For instance, when he spoke internally about the necessity of changes in East Germany, he did not fail to mention how pressing the need was to find a solution for the Berlin Wall. A textbook case was the run-up to the conference for the Eastern European Council for Mutual Economic Assistance in Moscow at the end of September of 1986, where he said when talking to his advisers on the Central Committee: “Every time we talk to Erich Honecker [the Chairman of the East German Communist Party] about the Berlin Wall, he starts squirming. That’s why we have to be more tactful about it – we have to talk about processes you can’t steer clear of”. The Berlin Wall was almost never explicitly mentioned when getting together with power brokers from East Germany, even though it was always in the air. Gorbachev preferred to avoid anything that even faintly resembled interfering in the internal affairs of the socialist countries. Internally, he said over and over again: the party governing there knows the situation much better and has to bear the full responsibility towards their citizens and history. That is why we should refrain from sticking our nose in their business. It was abundantly obvious what the political leadership in Moscow wanted, even though it was only stated in a roundabout way. Unfortunately, his intention, that was entirely correct, was unexpectedly transformed into a harbinger of failures to come. The concept that “everybody is his own man” does not work for a coherent foreign policy of a major power.

The great progress that perestroika made in the USSR made it obvious that the Berlin Wall did not have many days left. Erich Honecker was obstinate and refused to open his mind because he and the people around him were convinced that East Germany would only be able to thrive under the protection of the Berlin Wall which is why they declared the Berlin Wall to be absolutely indispensable. For them, East Germany would be doomed if the Berlin Wall fell. Moscow did not think in such dramatic terms about this problem and not everybody in the leadership of East Germany shared Erich Honecker’s pessimism either. He was overthrown on October 18, 1989 (which incidentally was not done with the active participation of Moscow, although the USSR hoped that afterwards the situation in East Germany might calm down). Then, the new people in power put at the top of their agenda the liberalisation of the law allowing people to travel outside the country. The first

version of the law published on November 6 was torn to shreds because the text gave the government apparatus too many formal options to curb people's freedom to travel. The next day the leadership of East Germany thought of a more radical solution. There was a seemingly endless row of cars filled with people trying to escape from East Germany on the territory of Czechoslovakia. The leadership of East Germany wanted to set up a special crossing especially for these people who had decided to turn their backs on East Germany forever at the border between East and West Germany, near Czechoslovakia. For all practical purposes, this would lift all of the restrictions on leaving the country that had been valid to date. East Germany asked Moscow what it thought of this idea and the Soviet Union had no objections.

To this day, nobody knows how the idea of an extra border crossing in the middle of nowhere metamorphosed into the idea of opening all border crossings, including the Berlin Wall with its special status. After all, detailed consultations on the Berlin Wall had been long overdue with the USSR because the Quadripartite Agreement of 1971 gave Moscow (not East Berlin) the key vote on everything concerning West Berlin. It goes without saying that the Soviet Union would not have voiced any objections to opening the Berlin Wall. Of course, they might have expressed the desire for a slight delay to give their colleagues among the Three Powers in the western sectors of the city and the Senate of West Berlin a decent interval to prepare for the coming wave of refugees. Yet, the Soviets only found out about the seismic shifts in their area of responsibility from the Western media. Günther Schabowski [the East Berlin Party Boss] made a mess of the declaration to the press that the Berlin Wall was open. That tale only serves to illustrate how helpless East German officials were in the face of the tidal wave of people standing at the border crossings of the Berlin Wall demanding to leave the country on the evening of the 9th of November. East Germany's new government was not only clueless; it had no idea how to derive any political advantage from their own positive decisions. At any rate, that was the impression that the political leadership in Moscow had of its most important ally in Europe that had still not realised that its end was at hand. However, the bewildering circumstances surrounding the fall of the Berlin Wall did their part to prompt Gorbachev and his advisers to conclude as early as January of 1990 that in the long run the

East German republic could not be maintained. And that meant building up a cooperative relationship with the Federal Republic of Germany sooner and not later.

The political leadership in the Soviet Union only had words of praise on the opening of the Berlin Wall, which Moscow only learned about officially on the morning of the 10th of November. The official Soviet press agency TASS published a favourable commentary at 2:20 p.m. Moscow time where they said the Soviet government backed East Germany's decisions because the Berlin Wall had become the symbol of the division of Europe. Tearing it down would therefore give a boost to building the European House. One hour later, Gennady Gerassimov, the speaker of the Foreign Ministry of the USSR, bore out this assessment at a press conference where he basically said that the decision to open the border was a sovereign act of East Germany and the new rules made sense. That did not mean that all borders would be suspended, but they only represented a portion of what should be done to stabilise the situation. In the course of the day, the Soviets ambassador in East Germany, Vyascheslav Kochemassov, was asked to transmit a verbal message to Egon Krenz from Gorbachev that included his thanks for the information given to them (albeit late) on the events of the night coupled with unequivocal encouragement: "Everything you did was absolutely right. Keep it up – be full of élan and don't let yourself be deterred".

As is often quoted, the Soviet military supposedly insisted on "decisive countermeasures" when the Berlin Wall was opened. But that is nothing but cheap sensationalism. Usually, Eduard Shevardnadze's instruction is cited in a nightly telephone conversation with Kochemassov on November 10th. The ambassador's verbal report to his co-workers on the same evening states that the Soviet Foreign Minister had information that "the military forces were making moves" in order for Kochemassov to make sure that Moscow's command "not to take any action" was carried out unequivocally. After this conversation, the ambassador dutifully called the then supreme commander of the West Group of the Soviet troops, Army General Boris Snetkov and recommended that he "stand still and stop and think". The general was totally amazed and denied that he had any other intention. Indeed, the members of the West Group had been stringently prohibited from leaving their barracks since November 6, which had been the rule before every

state holiday in the USSR and East Germany to make sure that “nothing happened”. As is known, on November 7th and 8th there was the 72nd anniversary of the Great October Revolution of 1917, which means that the duty to stay in the barracks could only be suspended on Monday, November 13th.

The confusion surrounding the minister’s instruction surfaced due to Kochemassov’s message when discussing the situation in the embassy on the morning of the 10th of November that “troops had been introduced (at the Brandenburg Gate)” during the night. It was obvious to everybody in the room that the ambassador had meant the East German National People’s Army. It soon became obvious that in this case his source had led him astray (which might have been a result of linguistic obstacles – Kochemassov had a poor command of German and the senior power brokers in East Germany sometimes only spoke broken Russian). Some of the people in power in East Germany had the idea of setting troop reinforcements in motion towards the Brandenburg Gate, although they soon dropped the idea like a hot potato. Unfortunately, in the course of the day the ambassador’s message percolated through to Moscow in its unadulterated form. Aleksandr Yakovlev, the éminence grise of perestroika, called the embassy (when the ambassador was out) and found out how the ambassador had formulated it, which he then interpreted in his own fashion. This is how the fairy tale of the insubordination of the generals of the West Group emerged. The truth is that not one single Soviet politician or military appealed for the use of force. The general attitude was that the situation as it had unfolded could and should only be mastered by political means. In any event, the general public in Russia hardly took notice of the opening of the Berlin Wall because, on the one hand, this event was looked upon as something quite ordinary and, on the other hand, the tempestuous developments in the USSR stole away public attention.

No matter how one looks at it, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent evolution of the political balance of power in East Germany caused a problem to emerge right in the Soviet Union’s strategic back yard in Europe, and this problem had to be solved – politically to be sure, – yet it had to be solved fast. The USSR felt it was being confronted with the following situation on a major political stage: most probably the “loss” of East Germany would be accompanied by signs that the socialist community was

crumbling. This was an explosive mixture for the entire security profile that Moscow had built up in Eastern Europe in the course of almost 50 years in the post-World War II environment. There was one condition under which it did not have to metamorphose into a tragedy. International detente (that had been both a prerequisite and a result of perestroika) had to become institutionalised. There was already a point of departure to do so – the final accords signed in Helsinki in 1975. There was even an acceptable blueprint for it – the project of the European House applauded by everyone. Now they had to apply the phenomenal energy of the German reunification process to accelerate motion towards European unification. A reunited Germany in a united Europe where both unification processes would parallel one another might show Moscow how to square the circle in the problem it was now confronted with. In other words, the breakneck speed of German reunification just might give the European House its best shot at realisation. Even the friends of the Federal Republic of Germany in the West came out in favour of a European Germany while expressing reservations given the potential of a “German Europe”. The crux was how the term “European” might eventually be defined.

To look at it differently, the strategists in Moscow had a very intricate game of chess to play. It was difficult, but not hopeless. Unfortunately, they were in total disagreement and there was a complete parting of the ways. The one side (mostly professionals from the Foreign Ministry – with the exception of Shevardnadze – and the general staff of the military forces) believed that the core of the problem was guaranteeing security for their own country. They thought German reunification should be balanced out by creating a system of collective security in Europe (or in the Northern Hemisphere from Vancouver to Vladivostok). Their attitude was that NATO should never be accepted as a substitute for this overall European system because there was no doubt that the Western alliance, as a creature of the Cold War, would generate new schisms. They also felt that they should try to get something like a promise of future security out of the imminent radical changes to have a say in the formation of the new Europe. It was totally irrelevant whether they would allow East Germany to exist for a longer period of time or keep a longer token presence of Soviet troops in Germany.

The other side (mainly the people surrounding Gorbachev, including himself) thought that the envisioned end to the Cold War would eliminate all of Moscow's foreign-policy worries for all time. They believed the West would receive the Soviet Union with open arms as soon as it let East Germany and the other East Bloc countries go. They were serious about their prognosis for the future embodied by the German poet Friedrich Schiller's poetic "Be embraced, ye millions". NATO was also a problem for them since the Alliance taking over East Germany made it look as if the USSR had failed or even been defeated. The West's promise that NATO's territory would not be extended eastwards (even though it was received like a general guarantee, in written form it meant the territory of East Germany and had a time limit – until the West Group withdrew) enabled Gorbachev to sell his project of giving up East Germany "without any compensation" (that was very unpopular among Russians) as a triumph of his personal diplomacy.

However, everything that has happened after 1990 has proven that Europe's security problems have not lost any of the significance they have had for centuries. Even after German reunification they still remain unsolved. The proposals that Dmitry Medvedev made here in 2008 are an honest attempt to make up for what was missed. This time, there might be a justified hope that Russia's voice will finally be heard.

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