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Fall of the Wall, a Reflection of the End of the Cold War Era

by AJ Powell 0 Comments 18 min read

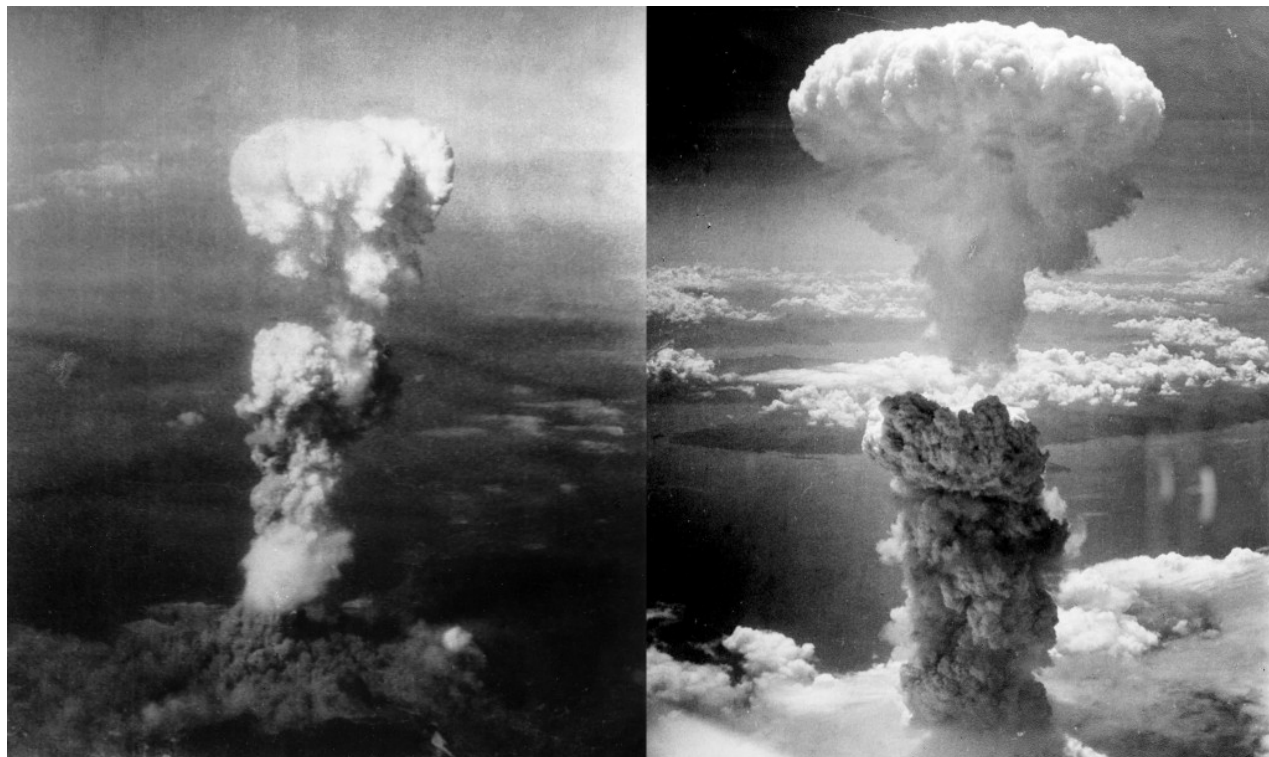


Written by [AJ Powell](#)

President Jimmy Carter once said, “It is precisely because we have fundamental differences with the Soviet Union that we are determined to bring this dangerous element of our military competition under control.”^[1] What he was talking about was the Cold War, what his words mirrored was the very underlying reason the war existed in the first place.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 was a surprise to the whole world. Shocking, to say the least, was the sudden disappearance of potential impending doom that for decades left the world in an uneasy blanket of fear. It was the idea that two superpowers had enough weapons of mass destruction to destroy the world several times over, and due to those very fundamental differences, maintained them aimed and ready to

launch at a moments notice with a hair-trigger, that left the world holding its breath for over 40 years. Efforts to reign in the seemingly spurring out of control production of these “Destroyer’s of Worlds”[2] would finally start just before President Carter took the oath of office. In 1971, the United States and the Soviet Union entered into a loose arrangement called the SALT I Negotiations. The aim of the agreement was to limit the deployment of antiballistic missile systems (ABM’s). These were ICBM[3] interceptor missiles guided by radar that were designed to shoot down incoming warheads before they had a chance to get close to their targets. However, the agreements were ineffective at curbing the source of the problem. It was not necessarily the fact that each side maintained nuclear capability that fed the fire of the Cold War – of course, there also is no argument that the existence of such weapons made the arms race possible – but instead, it was the differences in cultural mentality that thrust the Cold War into existence.



Atomic bombing of Japan

At the end of the Second World War, America demonstrated a new power with such inescapably destructive force that the whole world fell silent and marveled in horror at it. Regardless of the internal affairs within the Japanese Imperial Government at the time, there can be no mistake that the total destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki finally drew out complete surrender to the Allied Forces in the Pacific. We know today that the United States bluffed at more to come, despite the fact that they only had two and used them both[4], but the sheer amount of loss of life was enough. Japan simply did not want to take on that bluff and surrendered unconditionally in September of 1945 aboard the battleship U.S.S. Missouri (BB-63). Following the wake of WWII, the United States and Russia had emerged as the world’s most dominant nations, and in the fallout, both had acquired nuclear capabilities.

Yet the use of atomic destruction – while still widely debated from an ethical standpoint to this day – was merely a rude awakening. Both sides rushed to secure national interests and provide force projection for defense, but both did so for surface reasons that sparked from paranoia. The United States, eager not to allow the repetition of the mistakes England made through the appeasement of Hitler in the 30’s, saw the spread of Communism as the worlds newest threat to safety and security and steadfastly laid down a strong-armed policy of containment. Russia, with its firm belief that Capitalism would be the death of the world, became convinced that the only way to protect itself from the newly formed NATO Alliance[5] was to surround itself with like-minded allies of its own, giving rise to the Warsaw Pact[6].

By the 1970’s, many had prematurely claimed that the end of the Cold War had concluded at the draw down of the Vietnam War. The massive amount of Proxy Wars and Proxy Conflicts[7] that covered the world

became the stages for United States and Russian skirmishes – albeit, at the cost of millions of lives. Policy began to shift as internalization of national interests became more prevalent, and the idea of extending a greater effort towards diplomacy issues surfaced more and more. Thus opened the doors for the aforementioned SALT Negotiations[8] and President Carter’s reflection on the needs of the time. However, these new introductions never once fully addressed the true source of underlying distrust. By the time SALT II was in the works, a great amount of opposition quickly saw to its failure, as even the U.S. representative to the Joint Chiefs of Staff voiced concerns that the treaty was a “window of vulnerability”[9].

Relationships between the superpowers worsened during the 1980’s as a direct result of the many continuous international disputes. The United States was angered over the spread of Soviet influence throughout the Middle East and Africa, and the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan only made matters all the more difficult. President Ronald Reagan entered the office with a strong campaign to deal with the Communist threat and embarked on a massive arms buildup the likes of which the world had never seen. He revived older projects like the B-1 Bomber, the MX Missile systems, and the far more terrifying Hydrogen (H) and Neutron Bombs, and expanding into newer defensive programs like the SDI, a.k.a. “Star Wars”. As a result, relationships between the United States and her European Allies strained to maintain a sense of cohesion.

Reagan believed in a limited nuclear use strategy devised from Nuclear Use Theorists (NUT’s)[10], whereby nuclear use was thought of as possible without world destruction should it be used within the confines of limited strike capabilities on specific targets. This was a far cry from the traditionally outlined theories of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD)[11] conceived through the prisoner’s dilemma. The problem was that Reagan’s limited use targets were mostly all in Europe, and European nations had a right to be angry, after all, it was their own people and back yards that were now being thought of and treated as targets. Distrust further increased as U.S. led efforts to install Pershing II and Cruise Missile (Nuclear Capable) systems throughout Europe in response to the Russian SS-20 program was met with a Russian walk-out of the September, 1983 arms control talks in Geneva.



A military parade during celebrations in the Soviet Union in 1983 of the anniversary of the October Revolution.

Over the next several years, nearly all attempts at arms negotiations were met with failure as both sides refused to acknowledge the concerns or issues of the other side. Tensions soared as summit meetings

produced no real improvements, and the arms race seemed to inspire vastly higher amounts of suspicion. In fact, it wasn't until February of 1987, when Soviet Leader Mikhail Gorbachev suddenly shocked the world in an announcement that the USSR would negotiate with the U.S. on the premise of the Zero Solution policy[12]. In response, both Reagan and Gorbachev signed the INF Treaty agreeing that both sides dismantled both classes of medium-ranged missile types (1,000km – 5,000km range, and 500km – 1,000km range types) completely, while at the same time allowing for cooperative on-site verification to take place. Complete removal of these missile systems was finished by 1988.

Despite this new olive branch, NATO Commanders opposed the idea. Firmly entrenched in fundamental distrust of the Red, they believed the removal of those systems would leave the West open to Soviet invasion. They pushed to modernize strategic capabilities by replacing the aging Lance Short-Range systems instead with longer-ranged, more advanced and accurate missile systems as a way to make up for the new loss of all mid-ranged systems. Regardless, their efforts to continue a defense through offensive deterrent practices did not stop Gorbachev from shocking the world a second time at the start of 1989.

The world was shocked at the sudden Soviet retreat from Afghanistan, and again with the following unilateral withdrawal of six full Russian tank divisions from Eastern Europe. Gorbachev stood in front of the entire world and called out for total and complete “Denuclearization” of the European continent, and supported his new position by making the first move. Many questioned the sincerity behind Gorbachev's motives while remaining deeply suspicious of what might happen if the West responded in a like manner. However, what they failed entirely to realize was that the change was the result of efforts Gorbachev began many years prior. Gorbachev, it would seem, was the break from the traditional Soviet mentality.

By the time Gorbachev came into office, Russia had already seen nearly 60 years of internal oppression due to the Soviet machine. The people had to suffer through Stalin, Khrushchev, and Brezhnev's iron fists, while only Brezhnev might have given the people the slightest ray of hope for improvement had it not cost them everything for the sake of expansionism and defense spending. After Brezhnev's death, the Soviet people had to deal with subsequent tyrant failures like Andropov and Chernenko, who both retained office for too short a period to do anything relevant, and whose only major successes were clearing the Soviet political parties of a large portion of corrupt politicians and dissidents.



United States President Ronald Reagan gives his famous Speech at the Brandenburg Gate – June 12, 1987.

The Soviet people screamed for a change. By 1985, the people of the USSR had grown so apathetic and indifferent to both their lives and their national interests that hardly anyone would have considered themselves an actual citizen. Nearly anything would have become an improvement to the mind-numbing poverty the majority was subjected to, and most would have gladly deep-sixed their plights for a change that improved the nations internal struggles. That is exactly what came along when, in October of 1985, Gorbachev took office under the promise of reform and a new direction. The question now was not what he wanted to do, but could he actually do it. No Soviet leader since Stalin had been able to reign in control of the Soviet bureaucracy, meaning that Gorbachev faced a steep uphill battle.

Gorbachev promised to stimulate the economy, end corruption, and motivate the people to join the political process. He did just that. With a motivation not seen in 40 years, Gorbachev cleared house by publicizing the corruption of political figures and publicly firing them, then he moved on to social issues, like alcoholism. Alcoholism was practically a part of the Soviet genome. Massively popular, and highly lucrative for the state, drinking was actually a part of the underlying social discontent. Gorbachev believed that removing it from the picture would help aid in social recovery, but he was wrong. Instead, to get their fix, alcohol production was soon replaced with underground breweries, and tens of thousands began dying of poisoning due to drinking toxic substances as a substitute. The loss of revenue from production and sales backfired and left the state in more debt as a result, and Gorbachev soon abandoned the idea. Instead, he simply moved on to the next social issue he knew affected the people, Soviet history.

Marching on with a campaign of transparency, Gorbachev was determined to allow the people to know the truth about their past leaders. Lenin, Stalin, and the traditional Soviet way of thinking became under attack. Gorbachev knew that in order for the nation to move forward under his plan for reform, they had to openly confront the abuses of the past, but there was strong opposition from conservative party leaders. They were afraid of the change that Gorbachev promoted. He freed dissidents from prisons, encouraged new ideas and debate, tolerated demonstrations, and even allowed the flow of Western music and radio broadcasts. These things were completely against the old ways, and a threat to those who stood by them. But unraveling the restraints of the oppression that kept the people in line for so long proved similar to suddenly releasing a rabid dog. Internal conflicts soon began, demonstrations often became violent protests, and crime shot through the roof. By 1990, many states within the Union were uprising, armies had been sent in to subdue the masses, and calls for a breakup of the Soviet Union became more frequent.

Nonetheless, Gorbachev's efforts were largely misunderstood by the West, at least at first. The internal disasters plaguing the Soviet Union were taken in as socio-political unrest – which they were – but not as a major opportunity for the extension of relations that might have helped improve the situation. In the end, those same underlying social differences between East and West only further spurred caution as the majority in the West simply stood by and watch the Union crumble. The people now demanded modernization at a rate the government could not keep up with. They wanted employment, subsidies, fixed prices, and benefits. Yet in the efforts to shed the past and move towards the future, Gorbachev's policies were unprepared for the realities of what happens when a long oppressed people suddenly find themselves without that control. That same indifference sat firmly as – now with the choice to do so – refusal to change on a fundamental level created further decline. No mitigation could stop it by this point, and the Soviet machine would eventually quickly come to an economic halt and a social collapse, and we would see a new era rise from a soon to be reunited Europe.



A file picture dated: 11 November 1989, shows people celebrating the opening of the inner-German border with sparklers on the Berlin Wall in Berlin, Germany. ‘Tear down this wall!’. On 12 June 1987, US President Ronald Reagan pronounced these words to Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev during a speech at the Brandenburg Gate commemorating the 750th anniversary of Berlin. The Berlin Wall came down two years later on 9 November 1989, and the two parts of Germany were reunified after 28 years of separation. The building of the Wall began on 13 August 1961. German Democratic Republic (GDR) armed forces started to seal off the eastern part of the city with road barriers made from barbed wire, to build an ‘anti-Fascist protective barrier.’ On 9 November 1989, after the spokes person of the German Democratic Republic government, Guenter Schabowski, announced during a press conference the immediate opening of the inner German border, tens of thousands of GDR citizens flocked to the border crossing points. The Iron Curtain fell.

Peter Jennings reported live from Berlin on the 10th of November 1989 as mass celebrations took place at the East German government’s announcement that free travel was now authorized. Jennings reflected on the air, “How do you measure such an astonishing moment in history?”[13], he remarked in awe. Tens of thousands of people gathered and celebrated for weeks at the wall, and months still as mass sections were subsequently demolished. Only two years prior, President Reagan on his second visit to Berlin made a statement that sits among the most powerful statements in modern history. “Standing before the Brandenburg Gate, every man is a German separated from his fellow man”, Reagan proclaimed[14]. It is here where I can write about history as a matter of personal reflection.

In the early morning hours of a spring day in 2010, I stood before the Brandenburg Gate for the third time in my life. I was a United States Army Soldier stationed in Germany at the time, and through my own childhood memories of watching that famous speech from 1987 and the news reports of 1989 on the television at home, and combined with the power felt in the presence of that place as I stood there, I understood the mark of those very powerful words. There have existed so very many Brandenburg Gate’s, so very many Berlin Wall’s, and so very many Iron Curtains throughout human existence. These walls have not always been physical, indeed, most often they have been social and psychological. They have taken nearly every form of hate, discrimination, distrust and paranoia... everything from nationalism to terrorism. Sadly, though the Berlin Wall is now a thing of the past, today humanity has erected a vast number of greater walls within our own societies, and within our own minds. This creates a large array of conflicts that spawn new wars, new hate, new distrust, and new death. As a Soldier, I know this better than any, as no one wishes for peace *more* than the Soldier.

Standing before the Brandenburg Gate, a powerful and somber understanding manifests at the reflection of all it symbolized. As President Reagan continued his speech, his words brought that realization into existence. “East and West do not distrust each other because we are armed. We are armed, because we distrust each other”[15], he proclaimed. His very words highlighted why the fall of the wall was so shocking. The very reason for the existence of the Cold War itself lay buried in those words, and with the fall of the Berlin Wall came the fall of that familiar warm blanket called *distrust* and *paranoia*. Both East and West had been so very distrustful, deeply embedded within their own camps for so long, that now they had to face a new reality... the Soviets would need help stepping into a new frontier, and the start of a new age had begun.



Brandenburg Gate, Berlin, Germany.

Today, we can answer that question Mr. Jennings asked in 1989. How do we measure such an astonishing moment in history? We measure such things by the results they produce. Look at how the world has changed, isn't it amazing? Yet new walls have been created, and the death of one enemy gave rise to new ones, making President Carter's words just as true today as they were back in 1979. If we are ever going to learn one lesson from the collapse of the Soviet Union, it is that we all have fundamental distrust within us that we must learn to control. We all have our own Gorbachev's and Reagan's within us fighting to coexist. We each have our own walls separating our ideas. And humanity itself has many Iron Curtains of its own. The only way we will ever tear them all down, is by starting with ourselves, and then collectively working to tear down the rest together. More and more today does it seem that the only way to win is for each of us to play our own Zero-Sum Game.

We need to heed the words of President Reagan as he called out to the world in 1987... “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!”

Footnotes:

[1] Gilbert, Felix and Large, David C. (2009). *The End of The European Era – 1890 to the Present*. Sixth Edition. W.W. Norton & Company, New York | London. Ch. 13, Superpower Détente and Arms Control. P. 461.

[2] Words spoken by Julius R. Oppenheimer in quoting Vishnu from the Bhagavad-Gita, “Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.”, in reference to the first atomic bombs. Oppenheimer was an American Physicist and the scientific director of the Manhattan Project.

[3] ICBM – Intercontinental Ballistic Missile. Name given to multi-stage nuclear-capable orbital launch vehicle systems capable of containing multiple independently or non-independently guided ballistic warheads.

[4] Two bombs were completed at the time of the bombings; however, more were in the production process. It was estimated that a 3rd could have been ready by August, and a 4th by September.

[5] NATO (OTAN) – the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (the North Atlantic Alliance). Created in 1949, it comprised of 28 nations who provided for the collective defense of outside aggression (Article 5). In 2009, 22 additional nations became members. Today, NATO comprises over 70 percent of the worlds total military spending.

[6] Warsaw Pact – a counter-active collective defense treaty formalized in 1954 among 8 communist states in response to the NATO integration of West Germany. After the collapse of the USSR in 1989, the alliance was changed to the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

[7] Proxy War/Conflict – Armed engagements – either disclosed or undisclosed to the public – that are directly attributable to larger military or political engagements – either armed or unarmed – whereby their existence is “proxy” to the more prominent engagement.

[8] SALT – Strategic Arms Limitation Talks. Later labeled as the 1st of 2nd. SALT I was signed by President Nixon and General Secretary Brezhnev in May 1972. SALT II was signed by President Carter and General Secretary Brezhnev in June 1979.

[9] Gilbert, Felix and Large, David C. (2009). *The End of The European Era – 1890 to the Present*. Sixth Edition. W.W. Norton & Company, New York | London. Ch. 13, Superpower Détente and Arms Control. P. 461.

[10] NUT – Nuclear Use Theorists. Nuclear Utilization Target Selection was a “limited” nuclear target selection and use theory that contrasted the Mutually Assured Destruction nuclear deterrence theory.

[11] MAD – Mutually Assured Destruction nuclear deterrence theory suggests that – both sides being equal – the launch of one sides weapons will trigger an immediate launch of the other’s, even if the other side is destroyed, the launched weapons assure the aggressor is destroyed as well. This prevents both sides from aggressive actions.

[12] Zero Sum Solution – a situation where the gain (or loss) of one side is exactly balanced by the loss (or gain) of the other. The only solution for both sides to win, is for both sides to equally lose.

[13] ABC News Reporter, Peter Jennings, commented on the initial stages of the fall of the Berlin Wall, from Berlin on 10NOV89.

[14] President Ronald Reagan, Address at the Brandenburg Gate, 12JUNE87.

[15] President Ronald Reagan, Address at the Brandenburg Gate, 12JUNE87.

[Berlin Wall](#) [Brandenburg Gate](#) [Cold War](#) [Fall of the Berlin Wall](#) [Gorbachev](#) [NATO](#) [Nuclear Weapons](#) [Reagan](#) [Russia](#) [United States](#) [Warsaw Pact](#)

About the author



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AJ is a retired U.S. Army NCO who served in both the U.S. Navy and U.S. Army. He is a combat veteran, and has participated in contingency operations around the world. AJ is the Owner of Veteran Leadership Solutions, the Founder and Editor in Chief of The Warfighter Journal, and is a published Sociological Analyst, Researcher, Guest Lecturer, and Public Speaker. He is a graduate of Pennsylvania State University with a focus on Sociology and a science degree in Organizational Leadership, and is published in the field of sociology. AJ is an inductive analyst; public figure; researcher/writer; aviator; a certified advanced operational diver; professional instructor, trainer, mentor, and adviser; snowboarder; motorcycle rider; world traveler; he enjoys long distance endurance events, and much more.