



Manfred Kober

God's Hand in History

The untold story of the
collapse of Communism

In this age of turmoil, terrorism, and tragedies, many Americans are fearful about their own destiny and that of their country and of the world. But instead of facing the future with fear and doubt, believers should face the future with fortitude and confidence. Though it might not always seem this way, God is very much in control of human history.

God is concerned with what transpires in our nation, as well as in our personal lives, and is competent to act. One of the most splendid proofs for God's sovereignty in human affairs comes from the dramatic disintegration of Communism in Eastern Europe following the opening of the Berlin Wall on Nov. 9, 1989. The sudden and unanticipated liberation of millions of enslaved people serves as a vivid illustration of God's ability to totally and suddenly reverse a dreadful situation. God is able to completely change a seemingly hopeless situation at any time. This allows us to have faith in the future. The story of the collapse of Communism fortifies that faith.

Construction of the Iron Curtain

In the aftermath of World War II, the Soviet Union became a major world power. Its military enslavement of Eastern Europe resulted in the formation of a monstrous empire with the aim of exploiting its satellites for slave labor.

Within the Soviet Union, first Stalin and then Khrushchev and Brezhnev repressed any form of dissent. Concentration camps, penal institutions, and psychiatric hospitals for those

considered enemies of the state were scattered over the vast country. At one time or another, about 65 million Soviet citizens suffered in these camps.

Outside the USSR, the Soviet leaders expanded the Communist empire to ever more countries. These Soviet satellites (puppet regimes under the thumb of the slave masters in the Kremlin) made sure that disenchanted citizens were unable to leave their "worker's paradise." To prevent the escape of citizens to free nations, Soviet satellites began to build a barrier between them and free nations. This border—about 2,500 miles long, dubbed by Winston Churchill "the Iron Curtain"—was deadliest between East and West Germany.

The only escape route for East German citizens was West Berlin, as they walked from the eastern part of the city, under Russian control, to the western part of the city, occupied by American, French, and British forces. In 1961, escapees, numbering 2,500 per day, voted with their feet for freedom. To stop this rush to West Berlin, the German Democratic Republic began building the Berlin Wall. The construction of this barrier effectively closed off the last escape valve from this Communist prison.

An Efficient Barrier

In subsequent years the Berlin Wall, as well as the barrier between East and West Germany, were fortified more and more. Despite these barriers, desperate individuals attempted to escape their Communist slave masters. Many times their valiant efforts resulted in death.

In Berlin, the crude wall initially constructed of concrete

blocks was replaced with a 10-foot-high wall of concrete slabs that prevented a handhold for anyone attempting to scale the wall. In fact, a second wall, about 100 yards inside East Berlin and parallel to the first wall, made it impossible for anyone to approach the westernmost barrier. Individuals found between the two walls were shot by border guards.

So West Berlin was an island of freedom surrounded by a sea of Communism. While the wall separated the two parts of the city, West Berlin was also surrounded by fortifications of fences, minefields, and watchtowers. The extensive barrier separating the two parts of the country became ever more impenetrable, expanded to a three-mile-wide no-man's-land protected with fences, dog runs, watchtowers, bunkers, booby traps, and minefields.

The most closely guarded points along the border were the crossing points for automobiles and trains. Regular visitors to East Germany, like me, could observe the increasingly deadly nature of the border fortifications, making any escape attempt a suicidal venture. Virtually the only East Germans permitted to visit the free western part were citizens who had reached the coveted retirement age, 60 for women and 65 for men. Senior citizens were readily granted visas to visit friends or relatives for three weeks. Young people longing for a taste of freedom figured out how many years, months, and weeks were left until they, too, could make their first trip to free West Germany, a place they knew only from television programs.

Once the state had exacted from its serfs the labor deemed due from them, the people could leave. Many, broken in body and spirit, were unable to enjoy their few weeks of freedom.

The Prayers of Evangelicals

With the 40th anniversary of the GDR approaching and with no end to the Communist regime in sight, evangelical Lutheran young people gathered at the ancient St. Nikolai-kirche in Leipzig, East Germany. Since September 1982, a fearless pastor, Christian Führer, had led Monday-night prayer vigils. In 1989 the number of young people who came together increased dramatically. They fervently asked God for a change of government. After a challenge from the pastor, the worshipers carried lit candles around the inner ring of Leipzig. Returning to the church, they vowed to return for prayer the following Monday if God had not yet granted their request.

In numerous other cities throughout the country, individual prayer vigils were held. What started as an effort by evangelical Lutheran students and pastors soon encompassed a large segment of the population.

Desperate Efforts of the East German Government

Those who gathered for a prayer vigil each Monday knew it was only a matter of time before the government would respond with force to this peaceful challenge. A great tension filled the air. Everyone felt that something dreadful was about to happen.

As the first Monday of October approached, reliable reports suggested that Berlin had given directives to all military personnel, armed riot police, and the feared Stasi, or secret police, to end the vigils and disperse the protesters by using deadly

force. As the masses throughout the country emerged from the bus and train stations that afternoon, they noticed that military personnel were stationed along every street leading to the two churches. Tanks and troop transport vehicles then moved in on the center of Leipzig, where, by some accounts, over 100,000 individuals had gathered for prayer. The military and police formed a tight cordon around the calm crowd. Most individuals assumed that when they finished their prayers and began their weekly march, they would probably face their executioners.

While thousands of individuals prayed, something occurred for which no one has yet found an adequate explanation. Someone in Leipzig countermanded the directive from Berlin to shoot to kill. It is unclear who disobeyed the deadly directive. Perhaps the enormous crowd of peaceful demonstrators showed the authorities the futility of using force. As the worshipers lit their candles, they noticed that their executioners had vanished. The military vehicles had been removed. They were free to go on their accustomed circular walk, and then they returned to their homes. Horst Sindermann, a member of the governing clique, said later, "We had planned everything. We were prepared for everything. Everything except candles and prayers."

One week later, on Oct. 18, the dictator, Erich Honecker, was replaced by Egon Krenz. A sovereign God granted the people their fervent request. Little did anyone know how soon and how spectacularly total freedom would come for them.

Explosion of Freedom

With the exodus of many thousands of individuals to West Germany by way of Hungary and 14 "freedom trains" in the summer of 1989, the East Germans' desire to be free to travel outside the Communist camp grew. To counter the unrest among the populace, the government decided to ease travel restrictions. On the evening of Nov. 9, 1989, Günter Schabowski announced, "We have decided today to implement a regulation that allows every citizen of the German Democratic Republic to leave the GDR through any of the border crossings for whatever reason." When Schabowski was asked how soon this would go into effect, he responded hesitatingly, "To the best of my knowledge . . . immediately, without delay."

Schabowski had providentially misunderstood the politburo decision, which stipulated that the law would go into effect the following morning and that citizens still had to have a valid passport and secure an exit permit at their local police stations.

East German citizens heard him say that the law went into effect immediately and failed to realize that an official exit visa would still be required. So it was that tens of thousands of people immediately went to the Berlin Wall, where border guards had no knowledge of the new decree. Frantic, they called their commander, who was unaware of the news conference. No one dared rouse Gorbachev from his sleep. The border guards, vastly outnumbered by the thousands approaching the checkpoints at the wall, were told by a lower-ranking official to step aside. Border barriers were removed, and the crowd surged through to freedom, scaling the wall and commencing a tearful victory celebration. Thus on that Nov. 9, without a shot being fired, without any blood being shed, the wall crumbled.

Divine Intervention

Little did President Ronald Reagan know of the ensuing dramatic developments when on June 12, 1987, he viewed the Berlin Wall and threw out this challenge: "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" He is credited by many to have started the steamroller that weakened the Soviet system and did not end until German reunification on Oct. 3, 1990. By steadily strengthening the military might of the United States, he forced the Soviet state to spend itself into bankruptcy.

Ronald Reagan, Günter Schabowski, millions of praying Christians around the world, and thousands of East German young people in their Monday-night prayer vigils were God's providential means to accomplish something that seemed impossible: the destruction of Communism in Eastern Europe and the resulting freedom for untold millions of enslaved individuals. Who would have imagined early in 1989 that by year's end the wall would be gone? Erich Honecker intoned on Jan. 19, 1989, that the wall would "be standing in 50 and even in 100 years!" He was totally oblivious to God's sovereign working. Many believers in Iron Curtain countries, indeed Christians around the world, had prayed for freedom for those enslaved by Communism. After 40 years God graciously and sovereignly answered their prayers.

Believers in America have prayed for decades that God would change the spiritual and moral decline of their beloved country. America began as a Christian nation. But its foundations have been undermined by theological and political liberalism and by secularism, nihilism, and paganism, as well as a host of other isms. Is it too late for America? Not at all. We are commanded to pray for our nation and its leaders (1 Timothy 2:1, 2), just as Israel was asked to pray for God's help. The direct precept of 2 Chronicles 7:14 is to pray. The divine promise is that God will hear. If God is pleased, He can answer our prayers for the United States just as suddenly and dramatically as He did on behalf of those living in Communist regimes. **B**

Manfred Kober (ThD, Dallas Theological Seminary) grew up in Germany and taught for 30 years at Faith Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary, Ankeny, Iowa. He currently ministers in Bible conferences and as the research assistant for Russ Doughten Films/Mustard Seed International.



Construction workers building the Berlin Wall in 1961, and German believers praying for its demolition in 1989.

