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The Berlin Wall's great human experiment

Want to know exactly how ideology and economics shape society? Split a nation in half. Twenty-five years later, what we're still learning

JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF/FILE

A boy waved to soldiers on the Berlin Wall in front of the Brandenburg Gate on Nov. 10, 1989, the day after the wall fell.

By Leon Neyfakh | GLOBE STAFF OCTOBER 12, 2014

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS ago this fall, a crowd of thousands gathered along the east side of the Berlin Wall and demanded, with the urgency of people who had spent decades under an authoritarian communist regime, that the border guards let them pass to the other side. That night, the gates swung open and the sledgehammers came out. Soon, the wall was all but destroyed, and the two countries it had kept apart for almost 30 years were finally joined back together.

The collapse of the Berlin Wall, which Germany will commemorate next month with an illuminated display of white balloons where the concrete barrier once stood, was one of the most extraordinary events of the 20th century. Not only was it a crucial factor in the eventual shriveling of communism in Europe, it was also a demonstration of what peaceful protest could accomplish in the face of an oppressive government.

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But before it fell, the wall did something that most people never think of: It created a massive laboratory for studying human society.

Imagine this: If you were a researcher trying to determine how a political system affects people's values, beliefs, and behavior, you would ideally want to take two identical populations, separate them for a generation or two, and subject them each to two totally different kinds of government. Then you'd want to measure the results, the same way a medical researcher might give two sets of patients two different pills and then track their progress.

Ethically, such a study would be unthinkable even to propose. But when the Berlin Wall went up in 1961, it created what London School of Economics associate professor Daniel Sturm calls a "perfect experiment." While people in West Germany voted in free elections, read independent newspapers, and protested if they felt dissatisfied with their government, their Eastern counterparts lived inside a surveillance state ruled by a zealously doctrinaire communist party. Where "Ossis"—an unofficial term for those who lived in East Germany—drove famously shoddy Trabant cars, wore drab clothing, and drank off-brand soda, their "Wessi" counterparts enjoyed Pepsi and regularly saw BMWs in the street. The two halves of the country were like a pair of identical twins separated at birth and raised by two very different sets of parents.

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Life behind the Berlin Wall

From 1961 to 1989, the Berlin Wall split a nation in two and stood as the Cold War's most visible political faultline. It created unforgettable scenes of division while it stood, and reunion when it fell.

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Over the past decade, the Berlin Wall has emerged as a uniquely powerful tool for answering questions about politics, economics, and human nature. How well does state propaganda actually work? What role do friendships play in stimulating business and trade? How does living under a repressive regime affect people's inclination to trust strangers and government institutions?

The results have proved exciting for researchers, but their value goes beyond the ivory tower: They're also likely to be important in preparing for real-world situations we may see in the future, like the opening of North Korea and Iran. "Understanding how, say, propaganda created by such regimes affects people's preferences is very important, particularly when these regimes sooner or later collapse," said Alberto Alesina, an economist at Harvard University.

The insights that have piled up since the fall of the wall make it clear how long a single political event can continue to have social and economic effects on the people who lived through it. The marks it left are still being uncovered and measured, more than half a century after the architects of the wall unwittingly made it possible.

The split was formalized in 1949: West Germany became an independent state in Europe; its smaller eastern counterpart, carved from territory the Soviet Union seized after liberating it from the Nazis, slipped behind the Iron Curtain. A little over a decade later, it became clear that unless drastic measures were taken, the massive wave of emigration flowing out of the East would cripple the country. And so a cinder-block wall went up in Berlin, complete with barbed wire and heavily armed guards who would shoot anyone who tried to climb across. Practically overnight, family members who lived on different sides of the wall were separated with no promise of seeing each other again. Grocery stores in the East abruptly stopped importing food from the West. And while there were a handful of checkpoints permeating the wall—which ultimately stretched a total of 96 miles—permission to cross was basically never granted to people from the East.

AP/FILE 1962

An East German guard carried Anna Szczygielski's luggage as the 70-year-old woman crossed the border to be reunited with two grandchildren. Her husband had died a year earlier.

For the next 28 years, East and West Germany were run about as differently as two countries could be. In East Germany's controlled economy, every citizen was guaranteed a (low-paying) job, housing was owned and allocated by the state, and people couldn't buy Levi's jeans except on the black market. West Germany,

meanwhile, grew into an economic and industrial powerhouse: By 1989 it was the third largest economy in the world, producing and selling a panoply of consumer goods. Politically, it was wide open; when a magazine editor was jailed for publishing unflattering articles about the military, public outrage was so intense that the editor was freed and and the country's defense minister resigned.

Alberto Alesina was thinking of none of this when he started working on a question that others in his field had found extremely difficult to answer definitively: How important is a country's official ideology in shaping people's political attitudes? A breakthrough came when Alesina spoke to a colleague, the economist Nicola Fuchs-Schundeln, who had recently used data on post-reunification Germany to study whether all the extra money people in the East were earning after the wall came down had made them more likely to save. The same approach, they realized, could help with Alesina's question about political attitudes.

At first, the researchers didn't know what to expect. On the one hand, East Germans might be resentful of the system that had constrained their lives; on the other hand, it was also plausible that they had become comfortable with the notion that a government would provide for basic needs at the expense of an open society.

Alesina and Fuchs-Schundeln used data from a German survey administered in 1997, and split the respondents into two groups based on where they had lived before reunification. What they found was that, at that point, people from the East still tended to believe in the social-service model. They were also more likely to support a robust government program to help the unemployed, and significantly more inclined to believe that social conditions, rather than individual will, determined a person's lot in life.

"We tend to think of preferences as a fundamental thing that economists cannot explain," said Alesina. "[Our paper] says, 'Look…living under a communist regime changes people's political preferences.'"

It goes the other way too, if slowly: When Alesina and Fuchs-Schundeln looked at survey results from 2002, they found that the two groups of Germans had begun to converge politically. Based on the data, they estimated that it would take between one and two generations—20 to 40 years— for the gap to fully close, and "for an average East German to have the same views on state intervention as an average West German."

The differences between the two Germanys went far beyond economic ideology. West Germans all had access to Western television networks, including one that was

American-controlled; they watched uncensored newscasts, shows like “Dallas” and “Dynasty,” and commercials for everything from Corn Flakes to Volkswagens. Most East Germans could get those broadcasts too, but a significant proportion of them—between 10 and 15 percent—lived in areas the signal didn’t reach. These people, concentrated mainly in Dresden and the surrounding Elbe Valley, were sometimes referred to as “the valley of the clueless,” forced to watch “political propaganda and Soviet-produced movies,” wrote Leonardo Bursztyn, a management professor at UCLA, and his German coauthor Davide Cantoni.

Western television, Bursztyn and Cantoni found, had an impact on East Germans and how they spent their money: Those who’d had access to it were much more inclined to buy Western products they’d seen advertised than those who had not. (In the ongoing debate about whether advertising works at all, consumption data on post-reunification Germany suggests the answer is “yes.”) Television affected people’s mindset in other ways as well. In a separate but related study, it was shown that watching Western TV had actually shaped East Germans’ views about work and chance, making them “more inclined to believe that effort rather than luck determines success in life.”

Perhaps the most horrifying aspect of life in East Germany was the surveillance state. Anyone you knew might be an informant to the secret police, the powerful Stasi, who maintained files on an estimated 6 million citizens and were known to pressure people to turn in neighbors, co-workers, and sometimes even friends and family members as traitors. Economists Helmut Rainer and Thomas Siedler used survey data to try to figure out whether living that way had left a psychological scar. They looked at the results of a Germany-wide survey that had been administered twice a year since 1980: According to their analysis, East Germans were much less trusting toward other people than their counterparts.

Perhaps discouragingly, their mistrust did not lift easily when the Stasi’s reign ended. When the researchers compared survey data collected not long after reunification to data collected in 2002, it was clear that living in a democracy for a decade had not made East Germans significantly more trusting of others.

Other studies have shown additional lasting differences. One found that, because in East Germany women were encouraged to work more than they were in the West, East Germans were significantly more likely to believe that men and women are equal. Another found that, because the East German regime ran official doping programs for athletes, East Berliners were much more accepting than West Berliners of performance-enhancing drugs 20 years after reunification. Another paper, by

Tarek Hassan of the University of Chicago Booth School of Business, looked at how businesses grew and spread when the border fences fell, and found that they tended to follow networks of personal connections. Ossis who did a lot of business with the former Wessis after reunification were disproportionately likely to have had friends, or friends of friends, on the other side of the wall before it was torn down.

These findings might be just the beginning of the Berlin Wall's lessons. "I'm surprised there aren't more people using it," said Daniel Sturm, who coauthored a paper about the economic slowdown suffered by cities that were in the center of Germany before the division but became peripheral afterward. "I think there are lots of open questions that we'll learn more about from observing what happened in Germany."

THOMAS IMO/PHOTOTHEK VIA GETTY IMAGES

People massed in front of the Berlin Wall after the border opened on Nov. 9, 1989.

AN EVENT THAT disrupts the lives of tens of millions of people is, obviously, more than just an experiment, and there's arguably something reductive about treating it like one. The researchers are well aware of this moral complexity.

"People have said to me, 'How can you do it?'" said Nicola Fuchs-Schundeln, who is a professor at Goethe University Frankfurt. "It almost sounds like we're saying, 'German separation was a great idea because it allows me to analyze many things.' That's obviously not what we think. But it's true that as scientists, we want to establish some causality, and to establish causality, you need some exogenous

event....Often these events are bad—a tsunami, for instance. But we analyze [them] for scientific reasons. It's not that we don't feel for the people, but it allows us to answer questions that we couldn't answer otherwise."

For anyone who remembers its power as a symbol of the Cold War, it will be no surprise that the legacy of the Berlin Wall can still be measured 25 years later—that many Germans who lived in the East continue to feel separate and different from their countrymen. It is still possible, though harder, to close societies off today; many nations still have limited travel, militarized borders, even closed Internets. And while no amount of expert understanding would be worth what Germans suffered, there is some consolation in knowing that their experience could someday help the millions of people around the world on whom a similar experiment is still being run.

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