

Tear Down This Wall of Nostalgia

By [The Moscow Times](#)

August 17, 2011

The  **Moscow Times**

This week marks two significant anniversaries: 50 years since the construction of the Berlin Wall and 20 years since the coup attempt against Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

The almost overnight construction of the Berlin Wall stunned the world in August 1961. Its abrupt collapse in 1989 also made headlines. U.S. President Ronald Reagan had stood near the wall in West Berlin just two years earlier and uttered his much-quoted challenge to Gorbachev: “Tear down this wall!” But few people thought that the parameter that had provided such a vivid illustration of the Iron Curtain would ever come down. And no one expected its destruction to happen so quickly.

Now, 50 years after the wall’s construction, few seem to care anymore. Or do they?

In Moscow, where the initiative for the Berlin Wall originated within the walls of Nikita Khrushchev’s Kremlin, any discussion of the wall is largely limited to think tanks. Berlin, after all, is a distant 1,600 kilometers away, and the wall itself is a relic in time. More than two decades have passed since its demise.

But some ordinary Russians are still distraught over the consequences of the wall's destruction — the domino effect it had on the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe and, after the failed coup in August 1991, the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991.

Often forgotten are the negatives of Soviet life. Instead people remember the glory of living in a superpower that sent the first man into space and effectively occupied half of Europe. The Soviet Union was also a country with inexpensive sausage, free education and health care, and no oligarchs or terrorism.

Today, the country's leadership has stoked this nostalgia, with Vladimir Putin reintroducing the Soviet national anthem and even referring to the Soviet collapse as “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century.”

Longing for “the good old days” is understandable. Everyone seems to do it: “My hometown was better than Moscow.” “My old job was better than this one.” “My first marriage was better.” But this kind of nostalgia is not wise.

Frankly, the good old days weren't all that good. We have a tendency to remember only good things and forget the bad. Many of us have met people who long for the Soviet Union. They recall how everyone was guaranteed jobs and the enormous gap between rich and poor did not exist. But what they often conveniently fail to mention is that store shelves were empty and there was no freedom of movement. Ironically, they often speak enthusiastically about their fondness for traveling abroad. Nostalgia is a tricky thing involving rose-colored glasses.

Berlin Mayor Klaus Wowereit got it right when he expressed alarm last weekend that some Germans were nostalgic for the Berlin Wall. “We don't have any tolerance for those who nostalgically distort the history of the Berlin Wall and Germany's division,” Wowereit told a ceremony commemorating the 50th anniversary of the wall's construction on Saturday. “The wall was part of a dictatorship. And it's alarming that even today some people argue there were good reasons to build the wall.”

We must not live in the past because we cannot influence it. What's done is done.

That said, we cannot forget the past. We must learn from our mistakes and the mistakes of others to avoid repeating them.

But it is an extremely poor use of our time today to live in the yesterday. We can only make a difference in our own lives and those of others today. We must live for today — with the hope of what tomorrow will bring.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/08/17/tear-down-this-wall-of-nostalgia-a8968>