

## OPENING THE GATES OF EDEN.

### On the physicality of the Wall.

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The twenty-fifth anniversary of the Fall of the Berlin Wall seems a propitious moment to reflect on what has been achieved since the coming down. However, it is also the best moment to reflect on what has passed unnoticed for being taken for granted. The event is named ‘the Fall of the Berlin Wall’, as if that element collapsed under its own weight, when actually the event celebrates an act of destruction, maybe the last radical one in a century marked by totalitarianisms, genocides and world wars. If we manage to overcome the trauma that we are living in the beginning in this century, we can realise that, with the act of destruction, we can reflect on what has been destroyed.

They say that when you place a wall, it produces an uncontrollable curiosity to discover what is behind.(Fig.1) That is the intention of this essay: to look at what was behind the Wall. With this purpose of analysing what has been destroyed, this essay will look at Berlin Wall both as *a* wall at its physicality; that as a constructive action, embodies a project, or a “surgical operation” as Khrushchev called it<sup>1</sup> and as *the* Wall its myth. So, there are two levels on the erection of the wall. On the one hand, the act of construction as such, with its physicality and creation. That constitutes *a* wall. On the other hand, there is a level of a larger project that embodies the wall, not making it stand, but elevating it to the level of icon: *the* Wall. Both levels are intertwined. However, my question is: does the destruction of the physicality of the wall mean the actual destruction of the project?

1. cf. Luchkov, Vyacheslav and Schechter, Jerrold(eds.), 1990. *Khrushchev Remembers. The Glasnost Tapes*. Little, Brown. Boston. pp. 169-170.



FIG. 1. Woman looking through a hole in the Berlin Wall. Photo by Robert Lackenbach/Time Life Pictures/Getty Images.

## Science and Technology. Context of the project:

This project takes us far in time, but overall in space, from the construction of Berlin Wall. In time, three years, ten months and ten days. In space, three hundred and sixty miles, from the surface of the barrier. It was the celebrated day of the launch of the first artificial Earth satellite, Sputnik 1, 4th October 1957. Sputnik 1 was the product of Soviet Union to show its technological and scientific strength. And the success on putting it into orbit triggered a new front in the Cold War: the Space Race. An out-of-Earth shinny metal sphere, it intended to change the history of human communications, no only among each other, but its understanding of what is above. Sputnik 1 came to fulfil the promises of the Soviet regime, the USSR was on the summit of the World. But overall, Sputnik brought a set of mind in which the Soviets could operate socially. It meant a metaphorical understanding of the achievements: modern society should look at the sky with the eyes fixed on the triumph of our technological power. The Soviet Union put the Earth into the sky.

That *tour de force* in the mindset of Soviet society was even more manifested one year later, this time some four hundred miles away from Berlin, but on the surface of the Earth. It was the Expo World's Fair 1958 celebrated in Brussels. The great attraction of the Soviet pavilion was a replica of Sputnik, overpassing the authoritarian sculpture of Lenin in the centre of the building, and, in number of visitors, to any other pavilion, including the American<sup>2</sup>. Following the conception of Brussels fair of emphasising scientific and technological progress<sup>3</sup>, the Soviet pavilion represented a

step above the narratives of the rest of participants. Sputnik took the communist regime over the World, into Space. The project of Soviet pavilion was an embodiment of the “claim that communism was the only way to master and apply the technical revolution to human life.”<sup>4</sup>

However, Sputnik was not the only achievement displayed in the Soviet exhibition. Along with it, there was present another technological advancement that was changing human life in the country: the production of industrialised concrete panels with which Khrushchev was putting forward one of his most ambitious projects, a nation-wide house construction programme. The housing estates, informally known as *khrushchovkas*, were trying to solve the severe housing crisis product of rapid urbanisation<sup>5</sup>. However, the project did not remain on solving the urban problem. The soviet regime took advantage and use the *physical* building, drawing a parallel with ideological construction<sup>6</sup>. That connection was evidenced in the pavilion. The entrance was presided by a large mural painting titled *Building Peace*<sup>7</sup> by Alexander Deineka(fig. 2). The painting illustrated the current developments in precast concrete Soviet industry, showing a construction site. On the right side of the mural, a series of female and male builders direct the works in an effortless harmony. Over them, the industrialised concrete panels come flying, like falling from the sky, in suspension, without pressure. The new technology overpasses the dirty constructive methods of the past bringing a limpid new society. That effect of the painting was even more dramatised by the placement of *Vladimir Lenin Proclaims Soviet Power*(1954) alongside the mural, the famous painting that depicts the Soviet leader. And, in-between as a link between both, the

2. cf. Reid, Susan, 2010, December. *The Soviet Pavilion at Brussels '58: Convergence, Conversion, Critical Assimilation, or Transculturation?* in Cold War International History Project. Washington. Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars. p. 41.

3. cf. ibid. p. 33

4. As cited by R. W. Rydell and N. E. Gwinn, eds, 1994. *Fair Representations: World's Fairs and the Modern World*. Amsterdam: VU University Press. p.196.

5. cf. Alonso, Pedro Ignacio and Palmarola, Hugo, 2014. *Panel*. London. Architectural Association Publications. p.52.

6. cf. Devos, Rika, 2009. *A Cold War Sketch: The Visual Antagonism of the USA vs the USSR at Expo '58*, in Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire, vol. 87. pp. 3-4.

7. *Building Peace* by Alexander Deineka. 1958. 8x16m. Archive of the Department of Architecture & Urbanism. Ghent University.



FIG.2. *Building in Peace*, Alexander Deineka's mural for the Soviet Pavilion at the 1958 Brussels World Fair, Archive of the Department of Architecture and Urban Planning, Ghent University, photo Lulsens.





quote of Lenin:

8. cf. Alonso, Pedro Ignacio, 2014, p. 35

9. For more information about Alonso's understanding of the flying panels and specific works see *Flying Panels* in Alonso, Pedro Ignacio and Palmarola, Hugo, 2014, pp.20-50.

*“we are proud...to start the construction of the Soviet state and to open a new era in world history.”<sup>8</sup>*

However, Deineka's mural did not operate by its own. It belonged to a 'corpus' of artistic production that worked together in a propagandistic effort along the 50s' in the USSR. They generated what professor Alonso have called the myth of the *flying panel*<sup>9</sup>. A series of works ranging from motion pictures, to paintings, to posters, to children cartoons linked among them in the fact that they depicted the construction of the Soviet state showing the industrialised concrete panels overflying the construction sites. All of them generated the myth of the construction of Communism as an non-violent act, limpid, light, moving without pressure. Almost eternal, overpassing History. Most interestingly, a medal illustrating the skywards reach of Soviet ambitions in 1959(fig. 3) brings again the connection of the two summits of their scientific power: Sputnik and the industrial concrete panels. If through Sputnik the USSR had brought Earth to the sky, Communism would bring heaven on Earth. The techno-scientific advances operated in both levels, and they would make utopia fulfilled.

Both technological success functioned in a position that helped to configure the social state of mind. The eyes of the soviets were looking at the sky with the conviction that the new society was coming from there; from the new era of the outer space, and from the new life brought through the flying panels. That frame of mind is relevant for the time in which the construction of the Berlin Wall took place.



FIG. 3. Medal illustrating the skywards reach of Soviet ambitions.

## Level 1. Ideology of *The Wall*:

So, by the end of the 50s', Khrushchev saw himself as the architect of both the housing estates and of the communist state. Ideology and physicality were deeply connected. As, some three months after the construction of the Wall, the soviets left it clear in the Programme of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union after its 22nd Congress, their ultimate goal was the advent of communism:

*“Under the tried and tested leadership of the Communist Party; under the banner of Marxism-Leninism, the Soviet people have built socialism.*

*Under the leadership of the Party, under the banner of Marxism-Leninism, the Soviet people will build communist society.<sup>10</sup>”*

In the tradition of Marxism-Leninism, it is worthy noting that the ‘Communist system’ under which the USSR was led was only a temporal stage towards the definitive last one: communism. As Karl Marx sincerely believed, communism was a future society in which people would live more freely. A society in which the institutions of the state were suppressed, replaced by a harmonious, self-administering society<sup>11</sup>. So, the previous step in which the Soviet union lived after the Revolution, was a time of construction, of bringing to present the perfect society of communism. Without construction and the urgency to bring communism to the present(as would happen in the USSR with the successors of Khrushchev that lost the faith on the possibility of a perfect society), the system would lose its legitimacy. Ultimately, the construction of communism was the horizon that justified the existence of a monopoly of power from the Communist

Party.

That project – or better, “Project” – was the driving force that moved Khrushchev to build the housing programme probably the most ambitious and successful policy during the years in which Khrushchev headed the Communist Party<sup>12</sup>. Khrushchev showed a genuine concern about the living conditions of big sectors of the population. After the rapid urbanisation and industrialisation carried out by Stalin, whole families were living in extremely poor conditions. Most of them in communal apartments, with one family assigned to one room, separated from the others with a simple curtain. Certainly, the technological advancements in Khrushchev’s industry, even though the construction was not particularly good and the quality of the houses was low, brought the transformation of the lives of millions of people<sup>13</sup>. There was a tremendous effort to materialise the project of constructing communist society.

Years after, Mikhail Gorbachev, head of the Communist Party by then, but certainly sceptical about Marxist possibility of bringing the perfect society to the present, remembered an anecdote of the times of Khrushchev, times in which the advent of communism was imminent:

*“A certain lecturer, speaking about the future communist society, concluded with the following remarks, ‘The breaking day of communism is already visible, gleaming just over the horizon’. At this point an old peasant who had been sitting in the front row stood up and asked, ‘Comrade Lecturer, what is a horizon?’ The lecturer explained that it is the line where the earth and the sky seem to meet.<sup>14</sup>”*

10. *Programme of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union*. Foreign Languages Publishing House. Moscow. 1961. p. 128.

11. cf. Brown, Archie, 2009. *The Rise and Fall of Communism*. The Bodley Head. London. p. 11.

12. cf. Ibid. p. 257.

13. See Colton, Timothy J., 1995. *Moscow: Governing the Socialist Metropolis*. Harvard University Press. Cambridge. pp. 367-76.

14. Mikhail Gorbachev and Zdenek Mlynár, 2002. *Conversations with Gorbachev: On Perestroika, the Prague Spring, and the Crossroads of Socialism*. Columbia University. New York. p. 37.

That horizon that points to the imminent coming of communism was the metaphoric form used in the propaganda mentioned above. If the line horizon is the place in which the new regime is seen, it is also the line that links earth and sky. And the myth of the flying panels and the achievements in the Space Race operate with the same connection of earth-sky-advent of communism. Technology and science were the means through which communism was to come.

Actually, the construction of the Berlin Wall could be also seen as the generation of a common horizon behind which we find the soviet regime. The radical horizontality of the physical wall brings also the presence of Khrushchev's horizon: communism. Marx and Engels prophesied the universal liberation of humankind. However, their vision did not include any safeguard for individual liberty<sup>15</sup>. Communism is a utopian form of society in which the freedom of the individual could be suppressed. Utopia, in the traditional view of Thomas More, necessarily brings with it the condition of isolation. The project of the perfect society starts only after the legendary founder Utopus breaks the isthmus that connects the island to the main land<sup>16</sup>. Utopia needs isolation, it needs to become an island. In the vision of Marx and Engels, communism needs to construct its isolation, leaving individual liberty outside. That was the position that Hannah Arendt, one of the most crucial opponents to Soviet power, criticised. In her famous *The Human Condition*, Arendt based her discourse on 'the human capacity for making new beginnings'<sup>17</sup> out of its personal liberty, because "each one of them[human beings] is capable of new perspectives and new actions, and that they will not fit a tidy, predictable model unless these political capacities are crushed."<sup>18</sup>

Communism, as utopia, needs to generate its gates at the level of theoretical project. Individual liberty is laid on the other side. The construction of Berlin Wall was just simply the physical materialisation of the necessary isolation the ideological project demanded.

## Level 2. Physicality of a wall:

By 1961, Berlin was a 'loophole' of more than 3.5 million of East German that decided to leave the communist 'paradise' since the end of World War II. The system on its way to communism had its geopolitical borders, however, it had a drain in the border between West and East Berlin. After the failure of the ultimatum to the international forces in West Berlin, and moved by the pressures of Walter Ulbricht – leader of the GDR – to close the border<sup>19</sup>, Khrushchev took the decision of simply materialising the ideological wall in Berlin. The solution to the Berlin Crisis was to come with the same clean, surgical operation<sup>20</sup> that was constructing communism in the housing estates, assuring the "minimal cost to the Soviet side"<sup>21</sup>. From the vision of harmonic establishment of communism, his movement was as clean as the tracing of a line in a map that he handed to Pervukhim, his ambassador in Germany, for establishing the border control – as he described in his memoirs<sup>22</sup>. The Sunday morning of the 13th of August 1961, Hagen Koch cartographer of the Stasi – left his home with a painting bucket and a brush<sup>23</sup>. His commission was to map in the cobbles the route of a wall that would close the division of the World for almost three decades. He embodied the movement of Khrushchev pencil in the map in real scale. Following the white paint line, the *flying panels* started fall-

15. cf. Walicki, Andrzej, 1995. *Marxism and the Leap to the Kingdom of Freedom: The Rise and Fall of the Communist Utopia*. Stanford University Press. Stanford. p. 71. See also Popper, Karl, 1957. *The Open Society and its Enemies, Vol. II, The High Tide of Prophecy: Hegel and Marx*. Routledge & Kegan Paul. London. And Popper, Karl, 1960. *The Poverty of Historicism*. Routledge & Kegan Paul. London.

16. cf. More, Thomas, 1975. *Utopia*. W.W. Norton & Company. New York. pp. 34-35.

17. cf. Prologue in Arendt, Hannah, 1998. *The Human Condition*. Introduction by Margaret Canovan. University of Chicago Press. London. pp. 1-5.

18. cf. Arendt, Hannah, 1998. p. xii.

19. cf. *Notes on the Conversation of Comrade N.S. Khrushchev with Comrade W. Ulbricht on 1 August 1961*. History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Russian State Archive on Contemporary History, Fond 52, opis 1, delo 557. Obtained and translated for CWIHP by Hope M. Harrison and included in CWIHP e-Dossier No. 23.

20. See note 1.

21. Zubok, Vladislav, 1993. *Khrushchev and the Berlin Crisis (1958-1962)*. in Cold War International History Project. Washington. Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars. p. 26.

22. cf. *ibid.* p. 26.

23. cf. Hollis, Edward, 2009. *The Secret Lives of Buildings*. Portobello Books. London. p. 276.



FIG.4. Construction of Berlin Wall. Industrialized concrete panels arriving to the Berlin Wall.



ing from the sky over Berlin.(fig.4) It was a harmonic, non-violent construction of the enclosure of the regime, with a social ‘acceptance’ although there were many discrepant Berliners help by a myth generated through propaganda. The physicality of a wall had embodied the ideology of communism. The Wall was materialised in a wall. Communism had configured its physical gates.

Going back to the 9th of November 1989, the anniversary we are celebrating, did the event supposed the end of communism? Did the destruction of the physicality of a wall mean the destruction of its project? It is curious to think that the loss of paradise always comes from a *fall*, either of its walls or of Adam and Eve. The fall of the Wall opened the eyes of the World to a reality that was not as utopian as it was portrayed. Behind the wall there was repression, lack of freedom and dictatorship. However, Europe was not reconfigured until some years later, and we still talk about Eastern and Western Europe even though politically our words do not reflect the situation. Communist parties are still ruling the systems of a big part of the World such as China, Cuba, Laos, North Korea or Vietnam. The departure of the panels as they arrived(fig. 5) points to the idea that the fall of the ideological project has not yet been produced.

A utopian society only ruled through a materialistic use of science and technology needs to establish its boundaries, leaving elemental human notions outside. Once established, that border is not easy to destroy. Its materialisation into a physical wall, put forward through technology, made it more evident. However, its destruction did not suppose the end of the project. Even more, the question still remains, *how can we be dissidents in front of ideological walls—been them communist or any other ideology—that have not physical presence, invisible maybe for taken for granted?*(Fig. 6)



FIG 5. The fall of a wall.





FIG.6. Fence protecting the construction site of the World Trade Center, New York.