

## **History in Hindsight**

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McFalls wisely reminds us that historical moments have multiple meanings. For me, it is important to place the fall of the Berlin Wall not just in a German or even a European but rather in a global context. Here's a selective history: In 1988, the Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachev begins economic restructuring (perestroika) and starts withdrawing from Afghanistan and reducing troops elsewhere. In Bratislava, Catholic dissidents push for religious freedoms, the latest of many anti-Communist protests across central and eastern Europe. In August, thousands of anti-government protesters are killed in Burma, Pakistani president Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq and the US ambassador to Pakistan are killed in a plane crash, and the Iran-Iraq war ends. In September, hundreds of thousands of people in Estonia demonstrate for independence; the Estonian Supreme Soviet declares sovereignty two months later. In Chile, Augusto Pinochet's attempt to renew his mandate is defeated in a plebiscite. Thousands of South Korean students demonstrate against former president Chun Doo Hwan, who later apologizes for corruption. Benazir Bhutto is elected prime minister of Pakistan.

1989 begins with the death of emperor Hirohito, who since 1926 had presided over the transformation of Japan from a rural country to an industrial giant: militarization and conflict against the ABCD powers, the Sino-Japanese and then Pacific wars culminating in the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, US occupation, then a postwar economic miracle. By Christmas, the Bank of Japan raises interest rates drastically, ending the bubble economy.

Also in January, the Polish government legalizes the trade union Solidarity. In South Africa, P.W. Botha resigns his party's leadership and the presidency and is eventually replaced by F.W. de Klerk, who starts negotiations to end apartheid. In February, following riots in Pakistan against Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses*, Iranian leader Ruhollah Khomeini encourages Muslims to kill Rushdie and his publishers. Khomeini dies that June, a decade after the Iranian Revolution brought him to power. In March, the Exxon Valdez spills 240,000 barrels of oil off Alaska. In April, pro-democracy Chinese students begin protesting in Tiananmen Square. June 4 witnessed simultaneously the Tiananmen Square massacre in China and the overwhelming victory of the Solidarity candidates in Poland. Later that month, 250,000 people gather in Budapest for the reburial of former prime minister Imre Nagy, executed following the failed 1956 Hungarian Revolution. In July, Burmese opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi is placed under house arrest. In August, the Pan-European Picnic is held on the Hungarian-Austrian border and Hungary removes border restrictions. Millions in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania demand independence, forming a human chain 600km long.

In October, the Commonwealth issues the Langkawi Declaration, resolving immediate action to combat climate change, the depletion of the ozone layer, acid rain, marine pollution, land degradation and the extinction of animal and plant species.

November 9 is the event now commemorated, or perhaps more accurately, now recognized as key. As McFalls notes: “today, when we look back at the Berlin Wall, people make up all kinds of stories.” Three days later, Brazil holds its first free presidential election since 1960. Five days after that, riot police break up a student demonstration in Prague, sparking the Velvet Revolution which culminates on December 29 with the election of Vaclav Havel as president of Czechoslovakia, four days after the execution of Romanian leader Nicolae Ceaușescu and his wife on Christmas day.

Given this context, let’s take the insight one step further: history is interpreted in hindsight, and its meaning depends on one’s perspective. From a contemporary German viewpoint, the fall of the Berlin Wall matters a great deal. From other perspectives, however, it may be less important than other events: Perestroika and reductions in Soviet troops. The deaths of Hirohito or Khomeini. Solidarity’s election win. The reburial of Nagy. The Langkawi Declaration. Tiananmen Square.

History is constantly being recast, and perception depends on location as well as on the selective construction of memory. For me, the political uses of history are fascinating. How do the viewpoints of history’s narrators influence its telling? Which events gain historical significance or symbolic meaning and why? In what ways are these events commemorated or subverted?