

Gorbachev was key to fall of Berlin Wall, former papal aide says

VATICAN CITY - The most important figure in the fall of the Berlin Wall was former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, who allowed the revival of political freedom throughout Eastern Europe, a former papal aide said.

Joaquin Navarro-Valls, who served as Vatican spokesman for Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI, commemorated the 20th anniversary of the collapse of the wall in an article published Nov. 5 in the Rome newspaper La Repubblica.

Navarro-Valls cited Pope John Paul's support for the Polish labor union Solidarity as a key development in the pro-democracy movement in the region. But he said that in evaluating the causes of that movement, it was impossible to ignore "the true great protagonist of it all, Mikhail Gorbachev."

"Gorbachev ... knew exactly what was going on and intentionally allowed the wall to fall by itself," Navarro-Valls said. The Soviet leader saw that the political movement in Eastern Europe was popular and unstoppable, and he avoided military repression and even verbal opposition, he said.

Gorbachev himself had given the "first big blow" to the wall when he announced in 1987 that the Soviet Union would no longer sustain the doctrine of domination over its East European satellites advanced by former Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev, Navarro-Valls said. Gorbachev was even more explicit in July of 1989 when he publicly renounced interference in the affairs of other states, he said.

Four months later, on Nov. 9, 1989, the Berlin Wall came down, and millions of East Germans poured through the gap to West Germany. The event marked a milestone in the political, social, economic and religious reforms sweeping communist Eastern Europe.

Navarro-Valls said that when Gorbachev first met with Pope John Paul in December 1989, less than a month after the wall's collapse, the two leaders "understood each other immediately."

“Both clearly understood the direction that history had begun to take. Both felt that freedom was not a political fact but a human dimension that was essential and not able to be suppressed,” Navarro-Valls said.

Navarro-Valls said that by the time Pope John Paul visited the site of the Berlin Wall in 1996, Gorbachev was already gone from power and was the missing figure in the scene. He said that Gorbachev, the “heretic friend,” had paid more than anyone else the “price of history that was being built according to his own convictions.”

Navarro-Valls said former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger once told him he considered Gorbachev incredibly naive for not taking steps to prevent the fall of the Berlin Wall and hold the Soviet empire together.

On the contrary, Navarro-Valls said, Gorbachev was following a deliberate policy, one that reflected Soviet fatigue with rule by force and oppression.