

FRG DAILY VIEWS WALL SHOOTINGS, PROPAGANDA

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[Article by Ralf Georg Reuth: "The Victim's Fate Is Usually Not Known in the West: Shots at the German-German Border"]

[Text] Berlin, 3 Dec 86--Shots from automatic weapons are startling people on the border in Berlin more and more frequently. East German Border Guards shoot at Germans from East Berlin and the GDR who are trying to cross the wall and the barbed wire. The fate of those who are hit or forced to surrender is not known in the West in most cases. If there is no doubt that an unsuccessful escape attempt actually took place, it is just handled in a small newspaper notice with the qualifier "reportedly," with the obligatory protest by the Berlin Senate and the Allies, before they resume their normal affairs.

On the night of 24 November 1986, when a refugee was shot to death in the north of Berlin by soldiers of the 38th Border Regiment "Clara Zetkin," things were a little different. Even in the press release from the Berlin Police Administration, precise details were given. It was reported that at approximately 1 a.m., a witness heard gunfire. He then ran out of his house and saw how a young man who had already climbed to the crown of the wall was hit by some more shots and fell to the ground. The witness also heard a soldier running by yelling, "I caught you, you pig!" When another soldier saw the dead man, he was so upset that he threw his hat on the ground. He was immediately disarmed and led away. (A pastor in Dahlem says he learned from a colleague in the eastern half of the city that the young soldier is in confinement, and the pastor included the soldier in his prayers last Sunday.) In the observations in the press release by the West Berlin Police, who arrived about 20 minutes later, it was concisely stated that there was brisk guard activity until about 3 a.m.

Since the public only knew of the testimony of one witness, and the Berlin Police were unable to make any of their own determinations concerning the action, many people began to doubt the believability of the witness. That changed dramatically when, on the afternoon of 24 November, three witnesses who observed the actions on the wall voluntarily gave detailed information to representatives of the press, radio and television. Photographs were taken through gaps in the wall in the brightly lit Death Strip. It was reported that

the blood-smearred refugee was dragged away from the wall with the white shirt of border troops. He was then covered with a canvas cover before being loaded onto the cargo area of a military vehicle and taken away. After the Berlin Alert Police and the French Military Police arrived, they climbed on the roof of a house, as one of the witnesses reported, in order to better observe the entire scenario. They could still clearly see the tracks in the finely raked sand where he was dragged away.

The ladder was still there, and the last few steps overtopped the wall. In the meantime, GDR Border Guards had climbed up the ladder several times to observe the information-gathering work on the Western side. One soldier from the GDR Border Regiment called out something spiteful, too. Politicians of all parties were revolted by such an action, and they called on the GDR to finally lift the inhumane standing order to shoot.

If the escape attempt of 24 November has made its way into the consciousness of many segments of the West German public, it is primarily due to the intrepid appearance of the three witnesses. This is, however, not always so. In such cases, many Berliners follow the advice of the Interior Administration's Advice Bureau, and do not publicly testify. This is primarily because they are afraid of GDR reprisals, be they on travel from West Berlin to the FRG, or in the form of refusal to permit entry into East Berlin, where relatives are often living. Besides that, many are afraid of being derided as "cold warriors" and fanatasists, as the realities of the wall do not fit into their mental image.

The SED communists foster the appearance of a peaceful border just as their West German helpers do. In their view, the peace on the "National Border West" is disturbed, at best, by "revanchist forces in the FRG." In the SED news magazine MILITAERWESEN it reads, "with their forward reconnaissance and active hindrance of border violations, members of the Border Guards accomplish tasks in the sense of socialist humanism." Escape attempts by GDR citizens are emphatically denied. There is no lack of explanations. For example, already dead boars--allegedly shot in the Death Strip--were used as an excuse and explanation for the shooting in the middle of the night. About the unmistakable events of 24 November one could read in the "UZ" ["Unsere Zeit"], the newspaper of the DKP [(West) German Communist Party], under the heading "Threatening Lie 121," that this was about the "old methods" of those "who are against the reality of the GDR and peace on this border." The GDR Foreign Ministry denied the incident, and especially because of this, one of the witnesses to the brutal shooting of 24 November now even fears for his own reliability. The foreign minister stands there as a liar, says this witness, and complains that there is no explanation from official West Berlin. He, therefore, wrote once again his observations in minute detail in a letter to governing Mayor Diepgen of West Berlin.

The witness' goal, which was pursued with his letter, could not be reached for the time being, because an official West Berlin confirmation of the events can be issued in the constitutional state only after the criminal police investigation by the Berlin State Protection is completed. Use of force by GDR organs

is, according to German law, subject to criminal prosecution just like any other crime. As victim of an escape attempt is the considered person whose death or injury is established with "probability bordering on certainty."

The example of Marietta Jirkowski shows how difficult such investigations can be. Wounded, she remained lying in the Death Strip in 1980 while two other escapees made it to territory of West Berlin. The two claimed to have learned just a few days later, that Mrs Jirkowski had died in an East Berlin hospital as a result of her severe gunshot wounds. Still, it took years before she was recognized as an escape victim by the investigating officials and registered in the victim statistics.

The "Jirkowski Case" is an extreme case. Normally, the investigation is completed much more quickly, and the conclusions are forwarded to the Central Archives in Salzgitter. By then, though, usually too much time has elapsed to dedicate the concentrated interest of the public on this case again. The indignation over this investigated crime on the German-German border remains in the offices. And politicians do not protest any more, either.

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