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THE BERLIN WALL

The Berlin wall is now a fact of life. It has and will continue to have fundamental influences on the everyday life of Berliners and on East-West negotiations concerned with the city and issues related to it. The purpose of this report is to describe the wall as it stands today to provide a framework for evaluating incoming intelligence. The miscellany of makeshift barriers that comprised the wall in the fall of 1961 has now been replaced by permanent structures. Changes can still be expected but they probably will be relatively minor in character and will have little effect on the functioning of the wall.

Evolution of the Wall

The border between East Berlin and West Berlin was adopted by the European Advisory Commission on 12 September 1944. It passes through the center of the city in a jagged line that follows the borough boundaries as established by a decree of 27 March 1938. Recent growth of the city, however, has shown little regard for these limits. As a result the border in some places runs along the middle of streets or cuts through buildings and across plots of land.

Even before 13 August 1961, all streets that crossed the border were blocked to vehicular traffic or were under surveillance by East German Police. Vehicular traffic was checked but restriction on pedestrians was limited to an occasional spot check. The S-Bahn (elevated electric railroad) and the U-Bahn (underground electric railroad) also crossed the border at several points. Although there were facilities for inspection and control of traffic, such restrictions as were applied were relatively ineffective, as the number of refugees attested.

The sealing of crossing points between East and West Berlin began before daybreak on 13 August 1961. Initially, the methods and material used were fairly crude and expeditious. Beginning about 15 August, however, more permanent barriers were erected at a few points and later at others, and the border began to take on more of the characteristics of a real "wall." Mayor Brandt made the first public reference to the border barriers as a "wall" in his speech to the Bundestag on 18 August, when he compared it to the "Great Wall of China." On 14 September the Spandauer Volksblatt referred to the barriers as "The Wall of Shame." The title was adopted readily and has been used frequently since that time.

At first, several of the crossing points along the border were blocked by a single roll of concertina barbed wire stretched across the street and attached at the ends to buildings or existing walls or fences. Other points were blocked merely by removing a section of the cobblestone street and placing the removed stones in layers in front of the excavation. In still other places the two methods were combined. Subsequently, concrete and wooden posts were installed and wire fencing was attached, large concrete slabs and stone construction began to appear at various points along the wall, and windows and doors of buildings on the border were sealed. Gradually, the hastily constructed expedients began to assume the character of the obstacle now commonly called the "wall."

The evolving wall and its rigid controls prompted several dramatic escapes by crashing through the barriers. The East German authorities responded by restoring the destroyed portions and tightening security along the wall. Such efforts did not reduce appreciably the number of breakthroughs, and on 19 November another mass construction effort was organized and barriers across

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likely avenues of escape were reinforced. A final crescendo of activity was reached on the evening of 3 December, when the East Germans commenced work at Friedrichstrasse and other crossing points, strengthening the walls, adding traffic mazes, installing tank barriers, and narrowing the passageways for vehicles and pedestrians. Throughout the entire process of sealing off the border, many residents living near the border were evacuated; homes and garden houses were destroyed; and a cleared area was established to provide the border guards with more effective fields of observation and fire.

Concurrent with the sealing of the border between sectors, the East German authorities tightened security along the sector/zonal boundary. Double wire fences, plowed strips, watch towers, and bunkers were constructed, and residents were evacuated. The borders of West Berlin are now as tightly, if not more tightly, sealed as the international boundaries along the Iron Curtain.

Characteristics of the Wall

The popular designation of the entire barrier system along the sector border as "the wall" has created some false impressions. Actually, the wall is a system of barriers and obstructions of many different types, not a single, uniform feature. Throughout its entire length of 43 kilometers (about 26-1/2 miles), it closely parallels but does not always coincide with the sector boundary. For about 28 kilometers or 65 percent of its length the wall traverses areas that are built up on one or both sides. It is in the middle section that most of the masonry wall has been built. The rest of the border consists of multiple fences of barbed wire or wire netting, which in many places follow such preexisting barriers to east-west movement as canals or railway embankments. The main "wall" is generally reinforced by armed guards and secondary obstructions such as more masonry, tank barriers, belts of torn-up pavement, cleared strips, and observation posts. Here and there, some fences of light construction seem to have been erected, mainly to cut off visual contact between East and West Berliners. Action on the announced plan to clear a strip 100 meters wide along the border has for the most part been limited to the suburban areas at either end of the border, where the clearing has consisted mainly of removing orchards, gardens, tool sheds, and a relatively small number of private homes.

In the heart of the city the wall consists almost entirely of masonry or the sealed facades of buildings. This stretch, about 13-1/2 kilometers long, extends from just south of Bornholmer Strasse to Schilling Brücke, except for about 1-1/3 kilometers where the water barriers forming the boundary are paralleled by barbed-wire fences.

The strongest part of the wall is at the Brandenburg Gate. Here prefabricated concrete slabs have been arranged in layers forming a wall 7 feet high and 6 feet thick with reinforced steel posts. To the north and south of the Brandenburg Gate the masonry wall is made of prefabricated concrete slabs about 1 foot thick. At sharp curves and awkward corners, smaller concrete blocks are used; they are also used to add extra height to parts of the wall. In most places the wall averages 8 feet high, but along Bernauer Strasse parts of it are 10 feet high, and along the French cemetery, even higher. Generally the wall is topped by Y-shaped iron rods strung with barbed wire. Previously existing walls have been used as primary barriers in those areas of the city where they were conveniently situated and suitably constructed. Barbed wire and, in some cases, broken glass have been added. Masonry barriers also extend for about 4.3 kilometers along the western edge of Treptow and for an almost equal length around the VEB Borgmann-Borsig plant in Wilhelmsruh.

Road blocks now wall off all but 7 of the 80 former border-crossing points. At these authorized crossing points, obstructions have been placed across the road, forming a maze with relatively narrow openings to facilitate control of vehicular traffic.

Tank barriers consisting of heavy steel tripods anchored in the road with cement back up the masonry wall at several places. One stretch of tank barriers runs from Voss Strasse south of the Reichstag ruins to Stressemann Strasse. Others are located on Zimmerstrasse at Wilhelm Strasse and at Friedrichstrasse, on Sebastian Strasse, and along the S-Bahn tracks between Wilhemsruh and Schönholz.

Wherever the border in Berlin follows along waterways (a total of 13.3 kilometers), the barrier characteristics of the waterway have been exploited, and have been reinforced on one or both banks by barbed-wire fences and in places by stone walls. Stationary or mobile guard posts provide additional reinforcement. Railroad lines and yards, which parallel the intracity border for about 10.3 kilometers, have barbed-wire fences on one or both sides. In some places rail embankments also have been exploited as barriers.

There is considerable variety in the way fences are employed as barriers. In some places they are the primary obstacle; in other places they are subsidiary obstacles. The barbed-wire fences consist of 6 to 8 strands of heavy barbed wire mounted on sturdy reinforced concrete posts. In many places they are erected in a system of 2, 3, or 4 parallel fences, 6 to 7 feet high. The area along the fences may be lighted at night. In other places, chain-link fences are topped by barbed wire. Barbed-wire coils are now used to back up primary barriers.

In the suburbs, cleared areas have been established to permit better control of the barriers. Former garden colonies -- such as Schönholz, Daheim, Spaethsfelde, Grueneck, and Am Rehpfehl -- have been cleared of trees, tool sheds, or anything else that might obstruct the view from the observation towers.

All these physical barriers are policed by a large complement of Soviet and/or East German security personnel. The guards are disposed in both stationary and mobile units. Stationary posts include a number of observation posts at strategic points, particularly in suburban and semirural areas. Within the inner city, observation posts are also located on the top floors of some buildings. An East German observation post has even been established on the facade of the Church of the Atonement. Other stationary posts guard sensitive and vulnerable areas, primarily street intersections. Mobile guards patrol the barriers. Their mobility -- the uncertainty as to their location at any given moment -- provides the physical barriers with additional security.

By virtue of the wall, the sector boundary has acquired the aura of an international boundary without a change in its legal status. It functions effectively and is now almost as much a part of the Iron Curtain as any of the legally recognized international boundaries dividing East from West. The recent erection of buildings at several crossing points, presumably to be used in implementing the new East German customs law when finally enacted, is another step in the direction of making the sector boundary function as an international boundary.