

The Wall Remained...

The Cold War began and ended in Berlin. For 44 years the Western allies and the Soviet Union confronted each other across the sector borders that divided East from West Berlin. The Berlin Wall changed the nature of that confrontation, but it did not eliminate it. Throughout the Cold War, West Berlin remained a symbol of Allied determination not to surrender Europe to Soviet domination. Before the Wall, West Berlin was, additionally, a lifeline to the West. After the Wall was built, it was an island of freedom in a sea of oppression. The Wall itself was a symbol of tyranny; the machine guns, the dogs, the concertina wire were the tools of dictatorship. There was no more clear-cut expression of what the Cold War was about, than Berlin.

At the heart of the city, the Berlin Wall stood as a physical manifestation of the Iron Curtain. West of the Wall, Berliners reveled in the growing prosperity of a new, democratic Germany. East of it they labored under the apparatus of a new dictatorship, still overshadowed by the ruins of the old. This dichotomy defined life in Berlin. The longer the Cold War lasted, the more concrete that was added to the Wall, the more it seemed that this dichotomy would endure.

Yet, permanent though it appeared, the Wall was impermanent. It was built, not as a demonstration of strength, but as an act of desperation, built to halt the flow of refugees who were fleeing to the West at the rate of 300,000 per year.¹ Throughout the Cold War, it stood as a reminder that here was a regime that lacked the support of its own people and could survive only

¹ *Current Weekly Intelligence Summary*: "Flight of Refugees from east Germany," 12 February 1959 (MORI: 45580) in Donald P. Steury (ed.), *On the Front Lines of the Cold War: Documents on the Intelligence War in Berlin, 1946-1961* (Washington, D.C. CIA History Staff, Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1999) p. 455-58.

by walling them in. It was obvious to all that, when the Wall fell, so, too, would the East German regime.

It was also obvious that the fate of East Germany was forever tied to that of the Soviet Union. Despite the formidable nature of the Wall's defenses, despite the fact that it was East German guards who patrolled it day and night, there was never any doubt that the Wall was built with the support of Moscow. It and the regime that had built it would vanish as soon as that support was taken away.

No one thought that this would be soon. East Germany was an armed camp, groaning under the weight of tanks, troops and aircraft. The massive military housing projects, the giant statues of Lenin that decorated the landscape,² made it clear that the Soviets were there to stay.

Thus, the construction of the Wall brought a kind of enduring stability to the confrontation in Berlin, a recognition of the status quo. This was a shift in Soviet policy. Both Khrushchev and Stalin had pledged to drive out the Western Allies. There is evidence that Khrushchev planned military action to do so, if necessary.² The Wall, by putting an end to the steady depopulation of East Germany, seemed to make that unnecessary. East Germans had little choice but to accept the situation and most did so.

This was reflected in the number of escape attempts, which dropped off dramatically after 1962. In part, no doubt, this was simply the product of the growing effectiveness of the Wall itself, which quickly became a more of a fortified zone than a simple barrier. Escape, always risky, became unacceptably dangerous for attempts that frequently involved children and whole families. Those who were most desperate to escape made their attempts first. By the end of 1962, those who remained had decided to settle down and try to get on with their lives. It is noteworthy, though, that, although escapes became rarer, they never ceased altogether. Each

² See the testimony of Oleg Penkovskiy in *ibid.*, pp. 613-15.

year, the Wall claimed a steady stream of victims, the last three in 1989, the year the Wall came down.³

The Wall further reinforced the separate civic identities of East and West Berlin, already well-established when President John F. Kennedy gave his famous speech, just outside Rathaus Schöneberg, the seat of West Berlin's government. Across the Wall, East Berlin's government was ensconced in the red-brick Rotes Rathaus. These two buildings came to symbolize the two Berlins, much as the Brandenburg Gate was identified with the division of the city. The two Berlins grew apart, separate but intertwined. For what it was worth, East Berlin had the additional prestige of being the capital of the DDR; West Berlin became a Federal German *Land*.

Inevitably, relations between East and West Germany on the one hand and the two Germanies, the Soviet Bloc and the Western Allies on the other, gradually became regularized. In 1970, West German Federal Chancellor Willi Brandt—Governing Mayor of West Berlin in 1961—signed the Treaty of Moscow, in which the Federal Republic recognized the postwar borders of Germany and conceded *de facto* recognition to the German Democratic Republic. The following year, the four World War II allies reaffirmed the rights of the Western Powers in Berlin, effectively recognizing the post-Wall status quo. In 1972 Chancellor Brandt signed the Basic Treaty with East Germany, mutually establishing formal diplomatic recognition. That same year, the two governments signed a transit agreement, guaranteeing West German rights to visit East Germany. The way was clear for the establishment of trade and for both Germanies to enter the United Nations, which they did in 1973. As the decade wore on, the two Germanies were more and more regarded as two separate states.

³ *Todesopfer 1989*, www.berliner-mauer-gedenkstaette.de

Bolstered by what was now a stable—which is to say, captive—labor force, East Germany achieved a level of relative prosperity that made it the jewel in the proletarian crown of the Soviet bloc. The rigidly controlled, centralized economy tempered massive investment in heavy industry and collectivized agriculture with not-always successful efforts to produce cheap consumer goods—typified by the notorious Trabant automobile—while extensive state subsidies kept prices low. Soon the DDR had the highest per capita income in the Soviet bloc, eventually exceeding that of the Soviet Union itself.⁴

But, East German economic success was relative and really only served as a measure of how bad things were elsewhere in Eastern Europe. In any case, the standard by which East Germans measured their relative well-being was not their fellow Soviet bloc countries, but West Germany. Reports from relatives, visiting West Germans and the sheer proximity of prosperous West Berlin meant that East Germans were well aware of how poorly they fared by comparison.⁵ If that were not enough, they were reminded daily by the omnipresence of West German television broadcasts, never blocked by the regime and received throughout the DDR. And it was noteworthy that, although West German rights to visit East Germany were guaranteed by treaty, no East German ever had the right—and few the opportunity—to visit West Germany.⁶

And the Wall remained.

Running like an open wound through the center of the city, it was a center of political activity. No Western politician ever visited Berlin without a stop at the Wall. Political demonstrations in West Berlin, large or small, focused on the Wall—and sometimes were met by blasts from water cannon fired by the Vopos. Its western face soon was festooned with graffiti—

⁴ In 1989, the per capita income in East Germany was \$9,679—compared with \$7,878 in Czechoslovakia, \$6,108 in Hungary and \$4,565 in Poland. That of the Soviet Union was \$8,700. CIA World Factbook, 1990.

⁵ 1989 per capita income in West Germany was \$15,300. *Ibid.*

⁶ Elderly East Berliners did have the right to visit the western half of the city.

sometimes political, sometimes not. A few feet away, in East Berlin, non state-sponsored political activity was, of course, impossible, but the silent presence of the Wall made a mockery of officially sanctioned rallies and marches down Unter den Linden, the central thoroughfare of East Berlin. In a bizarre manifestation of their isolation from the real world, the East German leadership commemorated the “sacrifices” of the border guards, eight of whom were killed when escapees or Western police returned their fire. In August 1986, school children placed wreaths on the memorial in Jerusalemstraße, to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the “Anti-Fascist Barrier.”

Increasingly, the physical barrier was buttressed by the power and authority of the sinister Ministerium für Staatssicherheit—the Ministry for State Security, or Stasi. Eventually numbering between 85,000 and 105,000 paid employees—the exact figure is unknown—the Stasi inserted itself into every aspect of East German life. The Stasi even had its own military unit, the 10,992-man *Wachregiment* “Felix Dzierzynski.”⁷ Supplementing the paid security officers was a network of perhaps 180,000 *Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter*—informants—recruited by conviction, opportunism, or coercion who monitored their fellow citizens and reported regularly to their Stasi handlers.⁸ The Stasi headquarters in East Berlin’s Normannenstraße was a gigantic information processing machine which kept a file on virtually every citizen of East Germany and everyone who ever visited East Germany. It was a safe bet that any organized activity in East Germany contained at least one Stasi informant. A special class of informants was established to spy on the informants. The efficiency and omniscience of the Stasi was the first hurdle anyone wishing to leave East Germany had to cross.

⁷ Mary Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship. Inside the DDR, 1949-1989* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) p. 48.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

Alongside the Wall, the Stasi manifested the undercurrent of violence that remained in Berlin throughout the Cold War. The Wall was a dangerous place, even for those who were not trying to cross it. Although not necessarily directly related to events outside of the Berlin, tensions along the Wall seemed to wax and wane along with Cold War tensions in general. The Vopos were prone to fire random shots into West Berlin, to counter what they regarded as suspicious behavior, or because they were bored. They also occasionally lobbed tear gas grenades into the West, while there were explosions—some of them bombs set by Western protestors. Random harassment of trains and truck convoys going to and from Berlin persisted. Hold-ups at the Sector Checkpoints were frequent, while the Western Military Liaison Missions—by treaty guaranteed untrammelled access into East Germany—were subjected to near-continuous harassment. At any time any of these low-level confrontations might escalate into violence. In 1985, one such incident resulted in the tragic death of Major Arthur D. Nicholson, shot by a Soviet guard while observing a Soviet military complex in East Germany.

But Nicholson's death already was an anomaly—after initial efforts to avoid responsibility the Soviet Union actually apologized two years later. The West and even the Soviet Union had gradually evolved out of the psychology of unrelenting confrontation that was part of the early Cold War mentality, but East Germany did not. Secure in their fortified housing complex in Wandlitz—just outside of Berlin—guarded by elements of Wachregiment Felix Dzierzynski and sitting atop a formidable security apparatus that quashed incipient discontent, the leadership of East Germany was a Stalinist gerontocracy out of step even with the leadership of the remainder of the Soviet bloc. From 1971 the country was run by Party General Secretary Erich Honecker, who, together with his closest advisors, socialist economics expert Günter Mittag and Stasi Chief Erich Mielke, retained a Stalinist vision of a communist utopia that proved unworkable in the

confines of the DDR. Any deviation from the rigidly-held Party line was not tolerated so that, like Stalin, Honecker was fed false information by subordinates who were afraid to report the truth about the real state of affairs in the economy and society. In 1986, he declared the DDR to be one of the freest countries on the planet. Two years later he asserted that the standard of living in the DDR was higher than that of the Federal Republic.⁹ Yet, crippled by the oil crises of the mid-1970s, the heavily state-subsidized economy already had begun to falter shortly after Honecker took power. By the end of the decade, the top-heavy state bureaucracy proved unable to cope with growing deficits and trade imbalances. The economy, insofar as it functioned at all, did so solely because of subsidies from the Soviet Union and—irony of ironies—hard-currency loans from West Germany.¹⁰ Exacerbating the situation were heavy expenditures on defense and an intensive government campaign to militarize education in the secondary schools. The Wall itself—which, even after it was completed, had to be manned, maintained and periodically rebuilt and reinforced—was a formidable drain on state finances. Along with the state security system, it contributed significantly to a level of military expenditure that was the highest in the Warsaw Pact, after the Soviet Union.¹¹ Internal dissent burgeoned, fomented by the Western press, which lambasted the East German government as top-heavy, paranoid, troglodytic and obsessively militaristic—reports which, despite the best efforts of the Stasi, could not be kept out of the DDR.¹²

Meanwhile, the ascension to power of Mikhail Gorbachev in the Soviet Union cut away the major external support for the East German regime. Under Gorbachev, the Soviet Union embarked on a program of internal reform that eventually would result in the overthrow of the

⁹ Peter Grieder, *German Democratic Republic* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) p. 90.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 82-83.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 82-83.

Communist government in Moscow. In foreign policy, Gorbachev moved towards better relations with the United States and NATO and towards serious reductions in nuclear armaments. Sometime between 1986 and 1988, the Soviet leadership came to the “momentous conclusion” that the massive Soviet military presence in Eastern Europe worked to the detriment of Soviet security.¹³ From that point on, they began to move inexorably toward withdrawal of the Soviet forces there. With this decision, the web of Soviet domination began to unravel all over Eastern Europe.

Against the backdrop of fading Soviet power, the Wall loomed once again in public consciousness. In 1987, President Ronald Reagan went to Berlin. Like all American Presidents, he made an appearance at the Wall, standing before the Brandenburg Gate, the monument that divided East from West Berlin. But Reagan’s intentions were different from those of any of his predecessors. Already he felt that he had forged personal ties with the Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev. Even as he stood at the Wall, the United States and the Soviet Union were beginning to implement the INF Treaty, bringing about, for the first time, the destruction of an entire class of nuclear weapons. Already, negotiations were underway for the dramatic reduction of strategic nuclear weapons and for the multi-lateral reduction of conventional forces in Europe. Now, President Reagan sought to surmount the Wall, reaching out to the Soviet leader to bring down this symbol of Cold War tyranny. “Mr. Gorbachev,” he said, “open this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!”¹⁴

Reagan’s remarks did not produce an immediate public response from Gorbachev, but, in truth, the Soviet leader already had washed his hands of “the small-minded Realpolitiker,”

¹³ Fulbrook, *op. cit.*, p. 245.

¹⁴ Remarks of the President of the United States of America, Ronald Reagan, at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, June 12, 1987. Quoted in Trotnow, Helmut and Florian Weiß (eds.), *Tear Down this Wall: US Präsident Ronald Reagan vor dem Brandenburger Tor, 12. Juni 1987* (Berlin: Alliierten Museum, 2007) p.219.

Honecker and his cronies and soon would abandon the East German regime.¹⁵ The Soviet Union simply could no longer afford the luxury of supporting inefficient regimes in Eastern Europe, let alone one so resistant to change of any kind. Perhaps partly in response to President Reagan's statement at the Brandenburg Gate, but, in any case as a part of the general Soviet withdrawal from Eastern Europe, in February 1988, Gorbachev declared the right of every country, "to choose freely its social and political system" before a Soviet Communist Party Central Committee plenum.¹⁶

To the overwhelming majority of Eastern Europeans, Gorbachev's statement was an affirmation of the right of national self-determination hitherto unseen in the Soviet bloc. To Erich Honecker, it was an endorsement of his right to try to sustain a Stalinist dictatorship against the rising tide of liberalism and reform. Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary began to move toward popularly elected democratic regimes. East Germany rejected all but the most cosmetic reforms and began to distance itself from Moscow.¹⁷

Increasingly isolated inside the Soviet bloc, Erich Honecker mobilized the army and the Stasi to meet internal dissent with force. Although he had done nothing specifically to discredit the East German regime publicly, Gorbachev was identified with the wave of change sweeping over Eastern Europe and, by extension, with dissent inside the DDR. After decades of holding the forces of counterrevolution at bay in West Berlin, the East German leadership was horrified to find them coming in from Moscow. New publications coming in from Moscow were banned. Demonstrators chanting, "Gorby! Gorby!" were arrested and soon even officially sanctioned gatherings were producing violent clashes with the police. Worse, the "bacillus" of democratic reform drifting in from the Soviet Union was infecting even East German communists. In 1988,

¹⁵ Igor Maximychev, "Berlin 1987 Cold War Turmoils or Birth Pangs of a New World?," in *ibid.*, pp. 259-63.

¹⁶ Quoted in Grieder, *op. cit.*, p. 92

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

23,000 SED members were put on trial for ideological offenses, the highest number since 1946. Still resisting the forces of change, on 18 January 1989, Honecker declared, “The Berlin Wall will still be standing in 50 or 100 years.”¹⁸

Before the year was done, both Honecker and the Wall would be gone.

¹⁸ Quoted in Grieder, *op.cit.*, pp. 94, 96.