

The Berlin Wall

Staff Member, NDC

Sunset August 12, 1961: The combined British, French and American sectors of Berlin were surrounded by 155 km of fortifications on their north, south and west sides and mirrored the defenses employed by the German Democratic Republic (GDR) along the inner German border. Only along the relatively “open” border between the Soviet and Allied Sectors, could Berliners go to and from East and West for work, family or pleasure.

Dawn -August 13, 1961: Berliners awoke to a new set of fortifications: the barbed wire and guards that the East Germans used to barricade the border between the Soviet and Allied sectors. Now, East and West Berlin were two separate cities. At this point in history, West Berlin evolved into a symbol of freedom, - an island representing choice and self-determination in a terrain of suppression. What the Berlin Wall was and why it was constructed are two key points to understanding, this iconic symbol of the Cold War.

The Berlin Wall closed the last, easily accessible route that East Germans had for emigration to the West. (Figure 1) The GDR had lost over three million citizens, roughly 20% of its population, since 1952. These were GDR’s ‘best and brightest’ usually well educated and skilled workers that were deemed the economic foundation of the socialist state. This brain drain led Walter Ulbricht, leader of East Germany, to push Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev for a resolution to the status of Berlin and an end to mass emigration. Though actually built to control the outward movement of East Germans, the wall was promoted inside the GDR as an “anti-fascism wall,” designed to keep what were referred to as Western fascists *out* of East Germany. The structure was built just inside the Soviet occupied sector border, technically outside the control of the Allied occupying powers. The Wall was first made of barbed wire strung between posts with VOPOs, [Volkspolizei - East German Police] or GDR soldiers standing guard. Within weeks of the first simple barricades going up, there was a concerted effort to build guard towers and replace barbed wire fences with concrete slab walls. People were forcibly moved from buildings that were along the border and could provide escape routes to the West. Some buildings were demolished to expand the ‘no-man’s land’ along the route of the Wall. Along Bernauerstraße, complete apartment blocks were destroyed.

Ultimately, the Wall and its accompanying ‘death strip’ surrounding West Berlin consisted of a wire fence, raked sand or gravel, more than 40,000 reinforced concrete slabs topped with smooth surfaced pipe, flood lights, reinforced wire fence/mesh, trip wires and signal fences, concertina wire, anti-vehicle trenches, tank traps and guard dogs leashed onto wire runs. By the end of the 1960s, there were approximately 110 watchtowers and 20 bunkers. The ‘Death Zone’ around West Berlin mimicked the Inner-German border, but without the mines and spring guns that were an added feature of the inner-border defense system. It was said that air travelers could tell when they approached West Berlin at night – there would be a ring of light formed by the floodlights illuminating the Wall’s route – a counterpoint to the darkened landscape of East Germany.

Throughout the collections, there are descriptions of the Wall, the Allied responses to its existence and its impact on the lives of both East and West Berliners.