

## Escapes...

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What if you were told you could not leave someplace? What would you do? If you wanted to leave, how would you go about escaping? For citizens of the German Democratic Republic [GDR], those three questions were serious ones. Leaving the GDR was considered desertion. Individuals who escaped were traitors and deemed politically, morally backward persons. Escape attempts were a criminal act in the GDR, and unsuccessful attempts faced harsh fines, up to three years imprisonment and/or deportation to internal exile in distant towns. The same penalties were imposed on those giving assistance with their escape attempt. Yet, even in light of those penalties, citizens of the GDR were willing to try to leave their country. Some were able to get official permits; some were ransomed by West Germany after being imprisoned, some escaped by way of other countries, and some attempted very visible escapes by directly crossing the border, either at the Berlin Wall or at another location on the East –West German border.

What provoked GDR citizens to take the risk of escaping? Some of the reasons given by refugees include specific social or political reasons, such as induction into the GDR military or being forcibly moved from one area in East Germany to another area away from family and friends. Other reasons were more unique, such as the destruction of villages as border fortifications were expanded. Still others cited the lack of opportunity and the deteriorating living conditions in East Germany.

How East Germans escaped is a study in the resolve of the human spirit. Although the majority of the escapees crossed by foot at little guarded, or fortified sections, others escaped in a more spectacular fashion, such as by building a tunnel or hiding under pig carcasses in a refrigerated truck delivering meat to the West. In 1979, one successful escape even inspired a movie – the hot air flight of two families using a cobbled together balloon and a home-made engine fueled by propane. Others swam, floated and wind-surfed the Baltic Sea to Denmark. Some of the more flamboyant methods involved a zip line, ultra-light planes or meat hooks to cross the Wall and the adjacent death strip.

The GDR was quite adamant in restraining its citizens. (Figure 1) East German soldiers had orders to shoot if individuals failed to halt when “requested” to do so at the border. Both General Hoffman, the GDR Defense minister in 1966, and Erich Honecker, General Secretary of the Socialist Unity Party from 1971-1989, stated on numerous occasions that those who do not respect GDRs orders will be shot. In 1982, the regulations were formally codified, and the use of extreme force was permitted against any who attempted to break through the border. Essentially, the GDR soldiers had a warrant to use lethal force to prevent any escape or border penetration. This authorization to use deadly force was more commonly called *Schießbefehl* - "order to fire" in reference to *Befehl 101 (Order 101)*.

[\(Figure-2\)](#)

Throughout the collection, there are descriptions and reports of successful and failed escapes as well as the regulations that governed the use of extreme force and the concurrent sanction to kill.