THE BERLIN WALL AFTER FIFTY YEARS

Introduction

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*F*ifty years ago on 13 August 1961, the East Germans sealed the east-west border in Berlin, beginning to build what would become known as the Berlin Wall. Located 110 miles/177 kilometers from the border with West Germany and deep inside of East Germany, West Berlin had remained the “last loophole” for East Germans to escape from the communist German Democratic Republic (GDR) to the western Federal Republic of Germany (FRG, West Germany). West Berlin was an island of capitalism and democracy within the GDR, and it enticed increasing numbers of dissatisfied East Germans to flee to the West. This was particularly the case after the border between the GDR and FRG was closed in 1952, leaving Berlin as the only place in Germany where people could move freely between east and west. By the summer of 1961, over 1,000 East Germans were fleeing westwards every day, threatening to bring down the GDR. To put a stop to this, East Germany’s leaders, with backing from their Soviet ally, slammed shut this “escape hatch.”

The Berlin Wall became the symbol for the entire Cold War period and for the differences between communism and democracy. When the Wall fell twenty-eight years later on 9 November 1989, it symbolized and helped lead to the end of the cold war. Just as efforts of East German citizens to leave the country led to the building of the Wall, so their protests over the lack of freedom of travel and other grievances with the leaders of the ruling East German Socialist Unity Party (SED) led to the collapse of the Wall. Most people in the U.S. and elsewhere are more familiar with the latter event, and its widely publicized twentieth anniversary celebrations in 2009, than with the building of the Wall in 1961 and life in Berlin for the twenty-eight years the Wall stood. This special issue of *German Politics*

and *Society* devotes five articles to understanding what the Wall was and how it affected Germans on both sides of it.

The East Germans built the Wall to surround the enticing “show window” (*Schaufenster*) city of West Berlin, which it did with a total length of 96 miles/155 kilometers. Twenty-seven miles/43 kilometers of this snaked its way within the city at the border between East and West Berlin, and 69 miles/112 kilometers encompassed West Berlin’s outer border with the East German countryside in Brandenburg. The Wall was 13 feet/4 meters tall. Ultimately the border became a “death strip” of between 49 and 492 feet/15 and 150 meters wide, made up of far more than one wall. What we know as “the Berlin Wall” was comprised of an inner, back-up Wall as the first element that an East German getting close to it would see, followed by a signal wire (silent so the refugee would not know s/he had tripped the wire alerting the guards), anti-tank barriers, a guard tower, high-powered lighting, a patrol strip for troops and vehicles, a raked field kept smooth so as to notice if someone left footprints, vehicle barriers, and finally the outer Wall to the West, the one people saw the external side of from the West. This latter Wall is what many people in the world think of as “the Berlin Wall,” although it was just part of the deadly border area and one that very few East Germans ever saw until the whole thing came tumbling down. Indeed, East Germans who were able to walk or drive through newly opened crossing points in the Wall after 9 November 1989 were shocked when they saw all the elements of the border and realized unmistakably by their layout that they had been directed against East Germans and not against the West, as SED propaganda calling it the “anti-fascist protective rampart,” had led them to believe.

The East German and Soviet decision to seal the border in Berlin in August 1961 came within the context of a broader crisis over Berlin between the Soviets and the Western Powers. Given the ongoing refugee stream from East Germany and East Berlin to West Berlin, Soviet leader Nikita S Khrushchev sought to force the Western Allies (the U.S., UK, and France) out of their positions in West Berlin and to persuade them to recognize the GDR and its sovereignty over all of its territory, including the land and air transit routes between West Berlin and West Germany (used by refugees). Either of these, the Kremlin leader figured, would lead to more stability in the GDR and give East German leaders the ability to control the refugee exodus. More broadly, Khrushchev sought a major victory in the cold war against the West, particularly in Berlin. Thus, he launched what came to be known as the Berlin Crisis with an ultimatum to the Western Powers on 27 November 1958. If the West did not agree within

six months to talks on transforming West Berlin into a de-militarized “free city” and to peace talks to finally sign a World War II peace agreement with the two parts of Germany, the Soviets would sign a separate peace treaty with the GDR. This separate treaty would then cede to the East German regime Soviet control over the transit routes between West Germany and West Berlin. It was clear to everyone that the GDR would likely then close down those transit routes, which would have two important results. First, East German refugees would no longer be able to flee from West Berlin to the farther safety of West Germany. Second, the Western Allies would no longer be able to get to their posts in West Berlin, which the Soviets hoped would result in West Berlin floating on its own without Western support and ultimately succumbing to communist influence.

Khrushchev resorted to this ultimatum to the West after years of being frustrated that the East German leadership was not taking the refugee crisis as seriously as the Soviets believed it should. In spite of many Soviet instructions to East German leader Walter Ulbricht since 1953 to find ways to stem the tide of refugees short of closing the border, Ulbricht had let the Soviets down. Khrushchev knew the refugees made them both look terrible and cast doubt on his assertions that communism was superior to capitalism. Khrushchev urged Ulbricht to moderate his hard-line policies so as to make the GDR more attractive to its citizens. Ulbricht, however, was a Stalinist who did not agree with Khrushchev’s reforms and who felt that any loosening of the reins of power might lead to a total loss of control and the collapse of the GDR to be swallowed up by West Germany. As we know, Ulbricht turned out to be right. Nevertheless, Khrushchev was a “true believer” in communism and thought his junior ally was just not trying hard enough.¹

Khrushchev’s effort to force the West to come to an agreement on a “free city” of West Berlin and a peace treaty with both Germanys did not succeed. Although he did force the West into talks on Germany and Berlin at both the level of heads of state and foreign ministers in 1959, 1960, and 1961 (including summits with President Dwight Eisenhower in Washington and Camp David in September 1959, a quickly aborted summit of the four leaders in Paris in May 1960, and a summit with President John F. Kennedy in Vienna in June 1961), no agreement was reached, and by the summer of 1961, East German refugees were streaming into West Berlin at the rate of over 1,000 every day. Particularly after the failure of the Vienna summit and Khrushchev’s ongoing threats to sign a separate peace treaty with the GDR, East German citizens increasingly felt a “panic of the door closing” (*Torschlusspanik*) to the West and got out while they could.

Under this rising pressure from the refugees and dashed hopes of coming to an agreement with the West on Berlin and Germany, Khrushchev finally gave in to Ulbricht's pleas to close the border in Berlin. Ulbricht had been working with his military officials on a plan for closing the border, so when Khrushchev agreed, the East German leader was well prepared, as Anatoly Mereschko, deputy chief of the operational department of the Group of Soviet Forces in Germany in 1961, recently recalled.² In a phone call between Khrushchev and Ulbricht on 1 August to discuss many of the details of sealing the border, Khrushchev was surprised at the ready answer Ulbricht had to his question of what they would do in cases where the border went down the middle of a street in Berlin: "We have a specific plan. In the houses with exits into West Berlin, they will be walled up. In other places, barbed wire will be erected. The barbed wire has already been delivered. It can all happen very quickly."³ After years of resisting this move, Khrushchev threw the full weight of the Soviet military behind the operation to seal the border, although the East Germans were the ones at the front lines actually closing the border.

The beginning of the erection of the Berlin Wall on 13 August 1961 thus came about due to Ulbricht's persistent pleas to the Soviet leader over several years, as well as occasional unilateral moves to restrict movement across the border, combined with Khrushchev's agreement to help seal off West Berlin less than a month before 13 August. The communist leaders chose a Saturday night to begin the operation, the night of 12-13 August, knowing that many Berliners would be out of the city in the countryside. In spite of the ongoing crisis over Berlin and fears that the East Germans would do something to stem the refugee exodus, Ulbricht and Khrushchev caught Berliners and Western leaders and intelligence services by surprise with their bold action in the early hours of 13 August. With barbed wire and other means, the East German border troops and construction workers closed off streets, subways, and waterways connecting East Berlin and East Germany to West Berlin. Families, friends, lovers, classmates, employers and employees, and so many others were thus brutally cut off from each other. This was the beginning of the Berlin Wall fifty years ago.

The following five articles will examine the details of what exactly the Berlin Wall was, how it affected people on both sides, and what remains of it now. Patrick Major looks at East German popular reactions to the building of the Wall and how the government responded to these. Jochen Maurer and Gerhard Sälter describe the duties, training, and backgrounds of the border troops who made the Wall into the deadly border it was. Pertti

Ahonen investigates the East and West German propaganda about the Wall, why it was built and what it represented. In particular, he focuses on how both sides publicly treated deaths at the Berlin Wall. Leo Schmidt describes the multiple physical layers of the border regime that we know as “the Berlin Wall.” He explains the way the East German regime modified the Wall at various points between 1961 and 1989 and how these modifications were connected to the GDR’s official portrayal of the Wall and of itself in the world. Finally, Hope Harrison looks at what remains of the Wall on the streets of Berlin and in German public discourse since 1989 and how the approach to the history of the Wall and its commemoration has evolved in the twenty-two years since the fall of the Wall.

The Wall was a symbol for what many now call “the second German dictatorship of the twentieth century.” Thus, for Germans, dealing with the history of the Berlin Wall is also part of coming to terms with the fact that twice in the last century, in one way or another they allowed or supported a dictatorship. Coming to grips with this is not an easy task and is an ongoing process. Looking back on the circumstances surrounding the erection of the Wall and its twenty-eight-year existence is thus also loaded with the weight of the Nazi past. The peaceful fall of the Wall brought about by East Germans on the streets who sought regime change somewhat alleviates the weight of the two dictatorships, but only somewhat. On the one hand, in contrast to the Nazi regime that was brought down only by its loss to the Allies in World War II, the SED regime was brought down by its own citizens. On the other hand, a few months of protests against the SED cannot make up for its forty years of domination.

The symbolic power of the Wall is felt not just in Germany but also far beyond its borders. The Wall was and remains in memory the most visible expression of an entire era in world history, the global Cold War. Its rise, duration, and fall were intimately connected with the bipolar competition between East and West. As Ulbricht told Khrushchev in September 1961:

The experiences of the last years have proven that it is not possible for a socialist country such as the GDR to engage in peaceful competition with an imperialist country such as West Germany with open borders. Such opportunities appear first when the socialist world system has surpassed the capitalist countries in per-capita production.⁴

Divided Germany and Berlin were at the forefront of the Cold War between the communist, command-economy Soviet bloc and the democratic, capitalist American bloc. Communist East Germany could only continue in the competition with the help of the Soviet Red Army in putting down a popular uprising in 1953 and the help of the Berlin Wall in

1961 in preventing East Germans from escaping to the freedom of the West. Both the rise and fall of the Wall were emblematic of the success and allure of the Western system and the failure of the Soviet system.

As the Cold War system began to break down in 1989, East Germans were inspired by Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms and by neighboring Poland's support of the Solidarity trade union and rejection of its communist leaders. In addition, increasing numbers of East Germans had been given the chance to visit West Germany and saw first-hand how different and apparently better life there was. They grew more courageous in challenging the SED and its restrictions, including on travel beyond the Wall. When Politburo member and press spokesman Günter Schabowski spoke without sufficient preparation at a press conference on the evening of 9 November 1989 and mistakenly announced that the Berlin Wall was open for travel to the West immediately, the SED lost power over the Wall as it was stormed by jubilant citizens.⁵

Broadcast on television all over the world, the images of East Germans, who were simultaneously joyous, amazed and moved to tears, flocking through the checkpoints at the Wall into West Berlin and then joining West Berliners in celebrating on top of the Wall at the Brandenburg Gate became the iconic images of the end of the Cold War. Although it was not clear then that the Cold War would end soon and although the Soviet Union continued to exist for another two years, **the** image people have of the end of the Cold War is the fall of the Berlin Wall. For so many people in Europe, the U.S., and beyond, the fall of the Wall signified the end of oppression and the spread of freedom and democracy. It made anything seem possible. This is why so many foreign tourists continue to flock to Berlin to see the few remnants of the once nearly impenetrable Berlin Wall and to marvel over its peaceful collapse.

Germans themselves have more complicated feelings about the Wall. Their experiences of the past twenty-two years since the fall of the Wall have been more varied than the initial jubilation of 9 November 1989. Uniting the two parts of the country that were divided for over forty years has been more complicated than imagined and hoped. The concrete Wall was dismantled more easily than the "wall in the mind" between eastern and western Germans. The passage of time and the birth of new generations, however, are removing this second wall as well. With the third post-Wall generation, no doubt the only differences that will remain will be "normal" regional differences which exist in every country, such as North vs. South or East and West Coasts vs. Middle America in the U.S or North vs. South in Italy.

The articles on the Berlin Wall presented here help to elucidate the history of this icon which continues to mean so many different things to so many people. It is rare that an edifice is invested with so much meaning, even after it ceases to exist in its original form. The fiftieth anniversary of the building of the Wall is a fitting time to re-examine its history from multiple perspectives.

Notes

1. Hope M. Harrison, *Driving the Soviets Up the Wall: Soviet-East German Relations, 1953-1961* (Princeton, 2003).
2. “‘Arbeiten Sie einen Plan zur Grenzordnung zwischen beiden Teilen Berlins aus!’ Interview mit Generaloberst Anatolii Grigorevich Mereschko von Manfred Wilke/Alexander J. Vatlin,” *Deutschland Archiv* 2 (2011); available at http://www.bpb.de/themen/NAWPSE,0,0,Arbeiten_Sie_einen_Plan_zur_Grenzordnung_zwischen_beiden_Teilen_Berlins_aus%21.html, accessed 6 March 2011.
3. “Niederschift eines Gesprächs des Genossen N.S. Chruschtschow mit Genossen W. Ulbricht am 1. August 1961,” *Die Welt On-Line*, 30 May 2009; available at <http://www.welt.de/politik/article3828831/Das-Gespraech-zwischen-Ulbricht-und-Chruschtschow.html>, accessed 6 March 2011.
4. Letter from Ulbricht to Khrushchev, 15 September 1961, Stiftung Archive der Parteien und Massenorganisationen im Bundesarchiv, DY 30/3509.
5. Hans-Hermann Hertle, “The Fall of the Wall: The Unintended Self-Dissolution of East Germany’s Ruling Regime,” *Bulletin* 12/13 (Fall/Winter 2001), Cold War International History Project (Washington, D.C.): 131-64; and Mary Elise Sarotte, *1989: The Struggle to Create Post-Cold War Europe* (Princeton, 2009).