The Beginning of the Berlin Wall
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For twenty-eight years an "iron curtain" divided East and West Berlin in the heart of Germany. Many events prior to the actual construction of the Wall caused East Germany's leader Erich Honecker to demand the Wall be built. Once the Wall was built the cultural gap between East Germany and West Germany broadened. During the time the Wall stood many people attempted to cross the border illegally without much success. This caused a very unstable relationship between the government of the West (Federal Republic of Germany) and the government of the East (German Democratic Republic). In this paper we will discuss events leading up to the construction of the Berlin Wall, the government that was responsible for the construction of the Wall, how it divided Germany, and how some people tried to escape from the East to the West.

Why the Berlin Wall Was Built

In order to understand why the Berlin Wall was built, we must first look at the events leading up to the actual construction of the Wall in 1961. In the Aftermath of World War II Germany was split up into four different zones; each zone was controlled by a different country. The western half was split into three different sectors: the British sector, the American sector and the French sector. The Eastern half was controlled by the Soviet Union. Eventually, the three western occupiers unified their three zones and became what is known as the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). The Soviet sector developed into the German Democratic Republic (GDR). The FRG and the GDR were a result of the two sides not being able to settle on a harmonious agreement in the aftermath of WWII (Harrison 53)

Many Germans in the East saw life in the West as more desirable, and that is

when much of the turmoil began.

> For East Germans dissatisfied with life under the communist system, West Berlin
> was a gateway to the democratic West. Between 1949 and 1961, some 2.5 million
> East Germans fled from East to West Germany, most via West Berlin. By August
> 1961, an average of 2,000 East Germans were crossing into the West every day.
> Many of the refugees were skilled laborers, professionals, and intellectuals, and
> their loss was having a devastating effect on the East German economy. (The
> History Channel website)

In order to curb the amount of East Germans fleeing to the West, the GDR began to

assemble the Berlin Wall. On the morning of August 13, 1961 Germans living in Berlin

on both the East and West noticed a barbed wire barricade running down the middle of

Berlin. This barricade was not built to keep West Germans out of East Berlin, but to keep

East Germans in East Berlin.

Who Built the Berlin Wall

The partition masterminded in 1961 by Erich Honecker and a small elite group of

East German officials was kept top secret until its construction on August 13th of that

year. The Wall served to divide a city and a nation as well as the communist world from

the capitalist world. People, as well as ideas, cultures, commerce and politics were

prevented from passing freely across this divide. Today, even though the Wall has fallen,

there are still divisions in the minds of those directly affected by the barrier. A "Mauer im

Kopf" (Wall in the head) divides the so-called "Ossies" (East Germans) and "Wessies"

(West Germans) into stereotypes created by their 40-year political rift, making unification

an ongoing challenge.

Erich Honecker was the mastermind behind the creation of the Berlin Wall under

the mentorship of Walter Ulbricht, a German Socialist political leader, and in

collaboration with a few others including Gerhard Exner, the chief of police who decided which policemen would monitor the construction of the Wall, and Werner Hübner, head lieutenant of the Nationale Volksarmee (NVA). Honecker planned the construction of a barrier that would change not only the city and country in which it was located, but the entire world. The planning took place in Honecker's private conference room in a building in Strausberg, 30 km east of Berlin (Lorenzen 90). There the walls were covered in maps and despite Ulbricht's June 15th declaration that there were no intentions to build a wall, plans were in the works to thwart the 3.6 million people who, between 1945 and 1961, used West Berlin to escape into West Germany where the economy was a free market and the wealth was greater.

Unbeknownst to the Berlin public, a combat alarm was triggered at midnight on August 13th and construction on the Wall began. By 2:00 a.m. the NVA was in place and Honecker was driving through the night to talk with commanders, insuring that everything would go as planned. At 4:00 a.m. Honecker returned to Strausberg and by 6:00 a.m. huge lengths of barbed wire had been strung through the city dividing west from east. U and S-Bahn lines were simply walled up, and buildings with fronts facing West German roads but sitting on East German property became part of the Wall. Front doors and windows were boarded up so that residents could only enter through the East German courtyards. Demolition machines tore through asphalt and cobblestone roads running east to west making the roads impassible, while police stood guard and turned away traffic (Lorenzen 97).

Who Governed the East and the West

After World War II, at the Yalta and the Potsdam conferences several discussions

took place to distinguish the borders of Germany and determine who would govern

Germany. It was decided that France, the United States, the United Kingdom, and the

Soviet Union, together known as the Allied Control Council (ACC), would divide

Germany and Berlin until Germany was able to govern itself (Behrman 31). In 1948 the

Soviet Union, governing the Eastern States in Germany, removed themselves from the

ACC after objecting to political differences in the Western zones of Germany governed

by the United States, France, and the United Kingdom.

In June 1948, the Western Allies introduced the Deutsche Mark in their zones as

the new currency in Germany (Murphy 52). This decision was met by opposition from

the Soviet Union which responded with the Berlin Blockade. The Berlin Blockade was in

full effect by July 1948. The Blockade sought to cripple West Berlin by halting all

transport of goods into West Berlin from non-Soviet countries. The Soviet Union wanted

full control over Berlin and by restricting the access of the governments controlling West

Germany; the Soviet Union believed they could seize this control. West Berlin's

resources were dwindling and something needed to be done. Britain, the United States,

and France needed to get cargo into West Berlin, or cede to the Soviet Union. The Berlin

Airlift was the answer (Murphy 57).

The Berlin Airlift was, on paper, an almost entirely impossible idea. The idea

was to bring resources into West Berlin through public air corridors via cargo plane. The

airlift lasted 15 months and ended in May of 1949, acclaimed as a great success (Murphy

74). That same month, the Western zones united to become the state of West Germany

(Germany). After the formation of West Germany, the Soviet zone became East Germany

in October 1949.

It became clear instantly that West Germany offered more work opportunities than East Germany. With people beginning to flock to West Germany and West Berlin, the East began to see political and economical turmoil. Many educated people began to move to West Germany also. East Germany sought to stop the flood of people and thus stop the economic hemorrhage they were experiencing (Hensel vi). During the night of the 12th and the 13th of August, 1961, East Germany started building a wall, and it would remain for over 20 years.

The East German government sought to protect its newly found separation with a security force called the Stasi (Sate Security Service). The Stasi were a group of investigators, interrogators, spies, and informants who monitored the lives of East German citizens. Though the true extent of the reach of the Stasi was not known until the fall of the Berlin Wall, East Germans grew to fear their government and keep a closed mouth (*Stasi*). The West German government did little to monitor the Wall.

How the Wall Divided Germany

Overnight a completely mobile, functional city had been cut in two; West Berlin was completely surrounded by East Germany on all sides. Almost immediately the political, economic, social and cultural effects began to be felt. Transportation was completely severed. The roads had been physically ripped apart, and the public transit lines were walled over allowing no one to pass. Of the three thousand who tried to escape, many were killed, gunned down by the border guards stationed at the Wall supposedly to protect East Germany from fascists. The world already knew it was divided politically between the socialists and the capitalists. The Cold War was raging,

and the division was clear. Symbolically, the Wall demonstrated the permanence and seriousness of that conflict and brought Germany into the center of the clash. Economically, Western goods were no longer procurable, not even by smuggling. Only East German goods were sold in the GDR and none of these were exotic or impractical. Families were split by the border as well as workers cut off from their jobs. The city was divided for 28 years with a wall that prevented nearly all communication. As a result, very different cultures emerged, each reflecting their own government's policies.

The East had been socialized to function collectively and be mutually cooperative, as a good communist country should be, according to Ken Smith, whereas West Germany stressed competition and personal achievement as desirable goals. 40 years after the original division of Germany, the Wall fell and released a joyful crowd flowing into West Germany. The jubilation, however, did not last for long. The high unemployment rates in East Germany drove workers into West Germany to usurp unionized jobs (Smith 69). Bernd Okun, a management consultant in Leipzig said, "Whenever Easterners communicate with Westerners the conversation is usually full of hidden digs and provocations. We are divided by 40 years of completely different lifestyles and experiences" (Dornberg).

Cultural and political differences that separate East Germans from West Germans are apparent and often continue to divide Germans into two distinct groups. It is assumed, that East Germans tend to be more social; they feel more respected at work, they are more spontaneous, and they avoid competition and have closer ties with their co-workers. They also vote differently from their West German counterparts. East Germans lived for 40 years under a one-party system; they are less likely to vote along party lines then they

are to examine individual political issues and the candidates that espouse them. Both sides have different expectations about what the state should do or provide. While West Germans tend to have highly developed party identification, East Germans often vote for whatever policies and politicians advocate for economic stability (Beckers).

Many other things differ from East to West. Smith notes that family ties have been affected. For example, Biba, an Eastern German woman, feels that her West German relatives are condescending to her and treat her as a less intelligent person for having been raised in the East (Smith 99). This may especially hurt Biba because in the GDR family relationships were supposedly closer than they are in West Germany. The monolithic state and close, sparse living quarters encouraged a strong family unit and family life (Smith 101).

Consumer culture also differs between the two parts of Germany. When the Wall was opened in 1989 East Germans rushed over to the other side to find exotic foods, toys, sweets and other consumer goods. Some people in the East had never seen a banana before and almost immediately, bananas were sold out as well as disposable diapers and other seemingly normal items that had not existed in the East for 40 years.

Lastly, the industrial nature of East Germany, and its financial dearth contributed to a sordid state of neglect and disrepair in homes, hospitals, agricultural lands and the region's lakes and rivers. Bitterfeld, a town in East Germany near Leipzig, has been said to be the dirtiest place in Europe. During the GDR Bitterfeld was the center of industrial chemical production. Metals such as zinc, copper, lead, and chrome have, as a result, leaked out of the plants and into the agricultural land and rivers in the area. The Spittelwasser River nearby is polluted so heavily that it has a dark brown color and reeks

of sewage and toxins. Some places in the GDR are unfit for living due to pollution like this. In the former GDR there are 10,000 km of rivers dead, 3% of the water in the regions lakes is fit to drink, 10% of agricultural land is contaminated from industrial emissions and 40% of the population in 1989 was living and breathing high concentrations of sulfur dioxide daily.

Escaping from East to West

Escaping from the East was at first somewhat easy. When the East Germans first closed the borders, citizens found their way across to the West by simply jumping on the S-Bahn or U-Bahn. Without a wall the border was difficult to keep a close eye on and difficult to guard from escapees. However, after the Berlin Wall was erected and literally cemented, the attempts became more daring and dangerous (Berlin Wall Online).

It is first important to note that there were many reasons for those in the East to try an escape across the border. The Wall not only split the country in two but it tore apart families, took away jobs and hindered the freedom of many Germans, especially Easterners. Many fled to escape the oppressive Socialist regime of the German Democratic Republic. Even people who only wanted to travel across from the East had much stricter regulations for crossing. Travel always needed to be approved, which was a difficult process in itself. And even with approval only a small of amount of East German Marks were allowed to be transferred into Deutsche Marks, which created a high financial burden (Berlin Wall Online). With all of the difficulties in attempting to travel legally, many were left with escape as the only choice. It is estimated that 10,000 East Germans attempted to escape to the West and that around half followed through with

their plans and crossed safely. The attempts ranged from digging under the Wall to flying over, while some also simply tried climbing over the Wall.

A large network of tunnels was built in an attempt to cross over to the West. The first well-known tunnel was in a graveyard near the border. Those who wanted to cross would bring flowers to the grave to mourn and would disappear under the ground to the West. This 46 foot long tunnel helped over 150 people escape until a woman left her baby carriage behind at the entrance and East German troops discovered and closed it (Swanson 115). A film entitled *Escape From East Berlin* was created about another heroic story of an escape tunnel. It was a less successful tunnel created by college students tunneling who started their tunnel in the West and after breaking ground in the East helped 29 people escape within hours before the tunnel flooded with groundwater (Burgan 72).

In 1981 another movie (*Night Crossing*) was created about a different successful escape, but this time through the air. Guenter Wetzel and Peter Strelzyk succeeded in crossing over the border with their families in a homemade hot-air balloon in September 1979. The two men, their wives and children flew the 60-foot-wide, 75-foot-tall creation made out of curtains, bed sheets, shower liners and other fabrics of every color for a total of 28 minutes in the middle of the night. Upon landing the family was unsure if they had made it across but was reassured when they spotted an Audi, which was only made in West Germany. It was the most famous case of many hot-air balloon attempts (Dornberg 101).

People also attempted to cross the Wall in a less extravagant manner, and at first a large number were successful in climbing over to the West. However, the government in

East Berlin took notice and outlawed the sale of rope and twine, which many had used as ladders. Although this type of attempt was successful for many, it led to the famous death of Peter Fechter. At age 18 he is one of the most well-known escape victims. He attempted to climb over the Wall on August 17, 1962, but while trying to get over he was shot. Fechter was hit while at the peak of the Wall in the plain view of hundreds of witnesses. He fell back onto the Eastern side and was left to bleed to death as the guards watched and kept those from the West from helping him. The incident caused a spontaneous demonstration in which the Westerners screamed "murderers!" at the Eastern Guards (Williams 22).

Although many of the escape attempts worked and some were so clever that they made it on the to silver screen, the Wall left a toll. It is estimated that at least 169 people were killed along the Berlin Wall (Dornberg 101).

Despite the efforts of East Germans attempting to escape to the West the GDR continued to win and keep the vast majority of their people in the East. The 28-year period that the Wall stood created a division between the East and the West that still exists. The Berlin Wall organized by the Communist East caused many of its people to resent its government and seek desperately to leave. When all is said and done, the Berlin Wall may have served to keep East Germans in East Germany, but it could not keep Western influences out of East Germany as the GDR may have hoped. Unfortunately, the negative effects the Wall caused are still felt by the people of Germany today.

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