

MILESTONES IN HISTORY

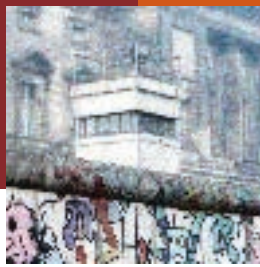
THE BERLIN WALL



THE CREATION AND DESTRUCTION OF A COMMUNIST ICON

by Eugene Finerman





The Berlin Wall was the manifestation of tyranny, the cruel boundary where Communism declared its ambition, arrogance and ruthlessness. An Iron Curtain extended across all of Eastern Europe, but it was never more evident than in the Wall that divided Berlin. This was the symbol of the Cold War, but its origins began at the end of another war.

What is to be done with Germany after the war? That was the chief topic to be decided by Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill and Josef Stalin when the Allied leaders met at Yalta in February 1945. The Allies knew that one final offensive would crush the Third Reich, but they wanted more from a defeated Germany than a white flag and a change in government.

As stated in the Yalta Declaration, the Allies' goals were "to destroy German militarism and Nazism and to ensure that Germany will never again be able to disturb the peace of the world." The Yalta Conference agreed upon a general plan for a post-war Germany. Following its unconditional surrender, a defeated Germany would be occupied, governed and rehabilitated by the Allies. Each of the Allied powers would have a sector of Germany to administer. This territorial division would reflect the military reality of where the Allied armies were; the British and Americans in western Germany and the Soviets in the east.

However, Berlin would have a special status. The Allies intended Berlin to be the capital of their administration. A joint commission representing the Soviets and the Western powers would decide and coordinate their policies. Although Berlin was 100 miles within the Soviet zone, the city also would be divided into sectors among the Allies. The British and Americans would police and administer their respective zones in Berlin and they would have unimpeded access to western Germany.

This spirit of cooperation lasted as long as Hitler did. He killed himself on April 30, 1945, as the Soviet army engulfed Berlin. When the Allied leaders—Stalin, Churchill and now Harry Truman—met at Potsdam, Germany, in July 1945, the Western powers already had evidence of the Soviets' intentions in Eastern Europe. Communist governments had been imposed on Poland and Hungary, although Stalin promised that they would be just temporary administrations until free elections could be held.

On the question of post-war Germany, however, Stalin did adhere to the agreements made at Yalta. The Soviet army kept within its designated zone,

half of Berlin was ceded to the Western powers, and they participated in the Allied Control Council for the governing of occupied Germany. Of course, participating is not necessarily the same as cooperating. Beyond the ideological differences between capitalism and Communism, the Western powers and the Soviets had diametrically opposite goals toward Germany. The Americans and the British wanted to reconstruct an industrial but rehabilitated Germany, whose factories would produce cars rather than tanks. The Soviets, having lost more than 20 million soldiers and civilians in the war, wanted a suppressed Germany, shorn of heavy industry and reduced to being a 136,000-square-mile farm.

With the Allied Control Council in a general state of deadlock, each occupying power now set its own policies in governing its German sector. Britain accepted American policy and aid in reconstructing the British sector. By 1947, western Germany was being administered as one zone. If the Western powers were creating one Germany, the Soviets were creating their own. German communists, who had spent decades living as obscure pensioners in Moscow, now found themselves being elevated to government ministers in eastern Germany. The sectors of Germany had become divisions.

There would be two German states, each proclaimed in 1949. East Germany was 41,646 square miles and, according to a 1946 census, had a population of 18 million. West Germany was 94,911 square miles and had a population of 45 million; however, West Germany also held an additional 186 square miles of territory: West Berlin. One hundred miles within East Germany, West Berlin stood as an enclave of freedom, a showcase of Western prosperity, and a sanctuary for those who sought to escape the tyranny and subsistence of Communism. In 1956, East Germany's population had fallen to 17 million. One million East Germans had defected, and most had escaped to West Berlin. While most of the East German border with its Western rival was defined by guards and lined with barbed-wire barriers, the division between East and West Berlin was perfunctory.

People passed freely from one sector to the other; half a million people crossed on a daily basis. Many East Germans worked in the western half of the city; the capi-

Souvenir hunters collected parts of the Berlin Wall after its official opening (far left); Vice President George Bush looks over the Berlin Wall into East Berlin with Berlin's Governing Mayor von Weizacker and Chancellor Helmut Kohl (left).



talist wages were higher. Shopping was another enticement; the stores of West Berlin certainly had more to offer than those of East Berlin. There were checkpoints at the pedestrian and traffic crossings, but a proper ID sufficed. The subways and trains between the sectors did not even have checkpoints; one could defect for the price of a ticket. It actually seems surprising how many people were willing to return to East Berlin; by 1961 the number of defections was more than 2 million.

East Germany had a demographic crisis: it was depopulating. Worse, the defections included the most skilled and ambitious of its work force. Walter Ulbricht, the leader of East Germany, had a solution that would be grotesque, barbaric, humiliating but effective: a wall around West Berlin. August 13, 1961, early Sunday morning as Berlin slept, East German soldiers and militiamen began constructing barriers along the eastern boundary of the city.

This, the first form of the Berlin Wall, was 103 miles of barbed wire around West Berlin. Transportation from West Germany remained unimpeded; but traffic between the two Berlins was now confined to a few heavily guarded checkpoints. Ulbricht announced that the barriers were meant to deter Western aggression.

The barbed-wire ring was soon supplemented with a 12-foot-high wall of concrete blocks. It took three years to complete. Yet, people continued to escape, climbing over or tunneling under the Wall. The masons working on the Wall had to be guarded against defecting. As a further deterrent, the East Germans began building a second wall 100 yards farther east of the main barrier. The ground between these two walls was cleared of buildings and pitted with trenches and traps. Furthermore, 116 watchtowers overlooked the area, and the guards had shoot-to-kill orders. That 100 yards between the walls became known as the Death Strip.

The Wall became the symbol of the Cold War. On June 26, 1963, President John F. Kennedy visited Berlin and, in sight of the Wall, he defined the "great issue between the Free World and the Communist world."

"Freedom has many difficulties and democracy is not perfect, but we never had to put a wall up to keep our people in, to prevent them from leaving us ... The wall is the most obvious and vivid demonstration of the failures of the Communist system ... an offense not only against history, but an offense against humanity."

But the Wall and East Germany seemed impervious to history and humanity. The only changes were further enhance-

ments in the Wall's formidable structure. Five years of construction created a new wall built of reinforced concrete slabs, 12 feet high and 4 feet wide, each weighing 6,000 pounds. Ironically, although the slabs were built to withstand impact and erosion, their surfaces were susceptible to graffiti. The youth and artists of West Berlin made a defiant art of decorating their side of the Wall.

This was the ominous yet satirically adorned Wall that President Ronald Reagan denounced on his visit to Berlin on June 12, 1987. The Cold War was thawing, a new and moderate leadership now prevailed in the Kremlin, and yet the Berlin Wall still stood. Reagan addressed Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev on this cruel incongruity.

"General Secretary Gorbachev, if you seek peace, if you seek prosperity for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, if you seek liberalization: Come here to this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!"

Mikhail Gorbachev was of the same mind. The Soviet Union was decaying, a fourth-rate economy that could not guarantee subsistence to its own people yet was subsidizing a world-class military and a restless empire. If the Soviet Union had any hope of survival and reform, it had to accept its limitations. The Soviet Union withdrew from Eastern Europe in 1989, allowing those former satellites to determine their own paths.

The new face of East Germany was Egon Krenz. Hoping to cultivate popularity, Krenz promised that the borders between the two Germanys would eventually be opened. When Krenz's propaganda minister announced on November 9, 1989, that the border would be opened for private trips abroad, tens of thousands of East Germans quickly assembled at the Wall's checkpoints, demanding access to West Berlin. The border guards were overwhelmed by the multitude, and no one in the government dared to oppose the popular surge. The gates went up and the crowd came pouring through. The Berlin Wall no longer had a purpose.

Without the Wall, there was no East Germany. It was reunited with the West in October 1990. The Wall itself became a quarry, subject to the chisels and hammers of souvenir hunters. Some sections were auctioned off, much of the rest was simply torn down. A few stretches remain as a historical monument.

Most of the fabled walls of history served to protect their people and those fortifications stood for hundreds of years. The Berlin Wall was built to suppress its people, and it stood for 28 years. The lesson is obvious. ■