

Commemorating Division



11. This image, found along the East Side Gallery, depicts Soviet Leader Leonid Brezhnev and East Germany President Erich Honecker sharing a passionate kiss. The image by Soviet artist Dmitri Vrubel is titled "The Kiss of Death." The painting has been redone, but remains on display.

To outsiders, the mention of the Berlin Wall brings up a vague image of a concrete barrier jutting up from a seemingly random border line, dividing a city both in political ideology and living standards. To Berliners, the Berlin Wall is much more than a physical structure. The term "Berlin Wall" is the culmination of watch towers, historical sites, memorials to the victims of GDR oppression, the fear and anxiety of 28 years of silence, Cold War political machinations, and a symbol of violence and division. "The Iron Curtain" as dubbed by British Prime Minister Winston Churchill in the aftermath of the erection of the barrier, had disappeared as rapidly as it had descended (Bach, 2016).

The wall came down on November 9, 1989. Months of pressure on the Communist bloc and East German government ended with the termination of the East German travel restrictions to the West. Due to misinformation disseminated by government officials, hoards of people

marched on the border gates intent on crossing over. The government's order had intended to lift *partial* restrictions, but once the people had been given their freedom, it was hard to take back (Engel, 2009). Harald Jäger, the border guard on that day, was afraid firing shots or taking other measures to disperse the crowd would only cause mass panic and result in death and injury. With no one answering in the government office, Jäger had no other choice: "'That's why I gave my people the order: Open the barrier!" (BBC News, 2019).

The symbolic falling of the Berlin Wall was a historic moment for the city of Berlin and the country of Germany, signaling the end of the Communist bloc and ushering in a new period of reunification. On November 9th, the Wall was a pivotal actor in the drama, taking the brunt of sledgehammers and baseball bats wielded by discontented Berlin citizens taking their long awaited revenge. However, the period following the mass display of reconciliation, although characterized by



12. The Berlin Wall “fell” on November 9th, 1989 after a clerical error by the East German government resulted in a mass protest along the border and eventual opening of the gates. Here is an iconic image of Berlin citizens tearing down the wall in celebration.

urbanization and public building projects, largely ignored the wall itself. Unsurprisingly government officials and civilians alike were more worried about appropriating land, initializing transportation, and restoring order than preserving an ugly barrier to progress. Thus, the border wall, its watch towers and vacated buildings

became available for private enterprise and youthful creativity. The part of the Wall that bordered the Spree River required tons of sand brought in from the Baltic Sea. What once was known as “The Death Strip” turned into a public beach. Snipers were traded in for lawn chairs, tanks for beach umbrellas and 90s style boom boxes (Bach, 2016).

It wasn’t until 2001 that the Wall became of interest to local and federal public officials as a historical monument and memorial in itself. The election of 2001 ended with a victory for the Party of Democratic Socialism who formed a successful coalition and took responsibility for the Wall, which had long stood as a controversial issue and eye sore. The Wall became a contentious talking point between leftists and conservatives. Conservatives, bruised from their recent loss, pressured the left for the realization of their campaign promise.

The solution, however, was far from easy. The city government was still reeling from a huge public relations blunder regarding the Wall. City officials had taken a bulldozer to the Memorial to the Victims of Soviet Oppression which stood in an abandoned parking lot along the Wall when the owner of the lot failed to extend the lease. Alexandra Hildebrandt, the artist behind the 1065 black crosses, dubbed the instillation the “Freedom Monument.”

Protestors chained themselves to the crosses to prevent its destruction but were forcibly removed. Six months later and 16 years after the fall, the government announced the “Comprehensive Concept,” which would restore portions of the Wall and structures and combine them into a single monument that spanned the length of the city (Bach, 2016).

The Concept as it became known, included the restoration and preservation of three sites, Checkpoint Charlie, the Brandenburg Gate, and Bernauer Strasse, six small memorials, two watchtower, the East Side Gallery, and the Niederkirchner Strasse. This list did not include a five km cobblestone path that follows the wall through the city, the “History Mile” which provides historical information regarding the Wall, and three parks. All of these sites along the Wall would be collected in a memorial database that would provide an all inclusive experience to tourists and civilians.

In an attempt to cover a breadth of historical information, the government designated education topics to each site. Checkpoint Charlie, geopolitical developments during the Cold War, the Brandenburg Gate, Berlin’s future as a united city, and Bernauer Strasse, the impact of the wall and its division. Reactions to each of the sites proved varied among tourists (Bach, 2016).

Checkpoint Charlie used to be an ominous,

“Western leaders fully understood Europe’s appeal. They had worked since 1945 to construct the type of peaceful and prosperous society others would find appealing. They were simply unsure how much they wanted to share in their bounty with former Communists behind the Iron Curtain.” - Jeffery Engel



13. Checkpoint Charlie is a popular tourist destination where visitors can take photographs of actors dressed in military uniform.
14. This image depicts Checkpoint Charlie as it once stood in 1961 as a functioning checkpoint between East and West Berlin.

and sometimes deadly crossing post, that regulated traffic back and forth between East and West. At Checkpoint Charlie, paid actors in costumes emulating American and Soviet soldiers pose for pictures with fake sand bags and a bright red painted border line. A clear example of place marketing, the checkpoint sells tiny souvenirs in a nearby shop (Bach, 2016).

Behind the cheesy tourist trap, however, is a deeper symbolic meaning to the monument. Checkpoint Charlie long stood as a last defense against Capitalist contraband, influence, and defections to the West. Jeffery Engel, author of *The Fall of the Berlin Wall: The Revolutionary Legacy of 1989* wonders if the Cold War really came to end

with the reunification of East and West. Could the invasion of Western ideology and capitalism in its tourist industry act as a weapon of humiliation? (Engel, 2009).

Unlike Checkpoint Charlie, Bernauer Strasse requires a different form of spectatorship. The street that used to border a long stretch of Wall still bears the mark of oppression. Rusted rods and degrading stone slabs are what's left of the landmark. At this memorial to the victims who lost their lives trying to cross over, visitors stand in solemn silence, paying their respects in the presence of the decaying ruins.

While Checkpoint Charlie is considered a contemporary monument, forever changing to

accommodate the whims of tourists, Bernauer Strasse is an “authentic” one. The street’s view is original, if not slowly being overcome with weeds. Although the government has committed to protecting the site from potential harm, the wall had been considerably damaged. Despite the wreckage, the site may be one of the best in the city to experience the “authenticity” and gravity of the trauma that the division caused. Here, one is guided by different views and artifacts, rather than posed actors to prompt remembrance (Bach, 2016).

Should art be memorialized like the street of Bernauer Strasse? The East Side Gallery presented a complicated challenge with this question in mind. Unlike both the Bernauer Strasse and Checkpoint Charlie, The East Side Gallery belonged to the public as individual citizens as much as it belonged to the government. Although the East Side Gallery was public property and thus could be sold off to real-estate investors for luxury condos, civilians protested any changes to the artist’s monument.

Over a period of 8 months, 118 artists from 21 different countries descended upon the crumbling GDR to display their work on 100 segments of the Wall. Although East and West had been reunited, the Wall came to symbolize a different division within Capitalist Berlin society — the rich and poor.

With the forcible removal of a nomad encampment in the area, and

“Last month, the whole world was stunned to hear that the remains of the Berlin Wall, now an art gallery, were being tossed aside to make way for an exclusive apartment tower: the once-terrifying symbol of communist oppression laid low by a monument to capitalist greed.” - Ex Berliner

and the gentrification battle looming in the neighborhood, the Wall has become a different form of government protest, this time directed toward the West. Graffiti along the wall continues to alert government officials to the presence of dissidents. While Checkpoint Charlie and Bernauer Strasse had been repurposed to serve Berlin’s tourist industry, native Berliners were unwilling to give up The East Side Gallery (Bach, 2016).

28 years of oppression and violence have left its mark upon Berlin’s urban landscape, most notably in the form of Berlin’s notorious Iron Curtain. While the border wall continues to stand in deliberate locations, its legacy of oppression has given way for one of protest and remembrance.



15. This image depicts a portion of the Berlin Wall known as the East Side Gallery. It is the product of 118 artists, who descended upon the large white canvas as a protest against oppression, specifically artistic oppression. The artwork is continually redone by the artists.