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The Berlin Wall – Long Gone?

By: Robert E. Dawes

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Introduction

On August 11, 1961 a Protestant Minister named Horst Kasner was returning from a family vacation in Bavaria. The Kasners lived in Templin, 90 miles directly north of Berlin, so Horst skirted the big city along its eastern side in the family's Trabant, the only automobile manufactured in East Germany. As they passed the city, Horst and his family noticed stockpiles of construction materials. These stockpiles seemed unusual to the Kasners, as very little construction activity was going on in East Germany. Horst and his family wondered what could be going on.

Two days later, on Sunday August 13th, the purpose of the construction stockpiles became clear to the Kasners and to the entire world. East Germany had built a wall (or Antifascist Protection Rampart as the East Germans called it) to separate the Soviet sector of Berlin from the American, British, and French sectors, and to seal off those other sectors from the rest of East Germany.

So effective was East Germany's wall at protecting East Germans from the West that no member of the Kasner family was able to visit West Germany for 25 years. In 1986, Horst Kasner's daughter Angela, now with a PHD in Physics and married to Ulrich Merkel, attended a physics conference in Hamburg.

This paper is not about Angela Merkel, but I'll mention her a few times because her story is very much part of the wall's story, and because the wall and the period of German separation had such an impact on her that, to this day, when she reflects on the past and uses the word "we," Germans understand she is talking about the Germans who lived behind the wall from 1961 to 1989.

The Berlin wall had a big influence on people in the West as well, particularly those of us who came of age during the cold war and for whom the wall represented the vast economic, political, and philosophical differences between the world's two superpowers and their allies. Even today the wall can evoke strong emotions and memories. So powerful and fresh is the image of the wall that many people at first react with disbelief when they learn that the wall has been gone for longer than it ever existed.

Is the wall really long gone? Or does it continue to influence and divide people, particularly Germans, for whom the Cold War was a civil war, and for whom reunification has had clear similarities to America's reconstruction period after our own civil war.

I'm presenting this paper in three parts. First, I'll briefly review how the wall came to be. Then I will discuss some major events during the wall's existence and talk about life on the other side. Finally, I will examine some fateful decisions made when the wall was falling and discuss the wall's impact on events of today.

Part I: The Berlin Problem

Germanic people have experienced divisions dozens of times throughout history, stretching back to before the time of Charlemagne. At various times what was considered German lands included or excluded Austria, Alsace, Lorraine, the Saarland, the Rhineland, Southern Denmark, Western Poland, and the Czech Sudetenland. But the division of Germany after World War II was unique in that the entire country came under the control of four great powers, and because the German capital city was similarly divided.

The terms of the post war division were agreed upon by Roosevelt, Stalin, and Churchill at Yalta in February 1945. What they had done there was confirmed and embellished by Truman, Churchill and

Stalin at the Potsdam conference in August 1945. The design was to invest formal authority over Germany in the victorious powers: American, British, and Soviet. To their number France was added at the war's end.

The physical boundaries agreed upon at Yalta and Potsdam divided Germany into four zones and Berlin into four sectors, one zone and one sector for each of the great powers.

Reading the declarations resulting from the Yalta and Potsdam conferences, one can only conclude the victors were expressing good intentions. Though divided, Germans were to be free to travel, to live freely, and eventually to assume control over their future.

The Potsdam Conference's Declaration on Germany stated, "It is the intention of the Allies that the German people be given the opportunity to prepare for the eventual reconstruction of their life on a democratic and peaceful basis." More specifically, the declaration stated "During the period of occupation Germany shall be treated as a single economic unit.

The Soviets unilaterally violated these understandings from the outset as they sought to impose the same level of control over their zone and sector in Germany and Berlin as they had in the rest of Soviet controlled Eastern Europe. In March 1945, just seven months after Potsdam, Churchill said in a speech in Fulton Missouri: "From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the continent." The cold war was on, and Berlin was its epicenter.

Airlift. Tensions grew steadily from 1946 to 1948 when the Soviets' most provocative move came in June when Stalin ordered a blockade of Berlin, closing the road, rail and water routes into the city. The allies reacted by using the air corridors to stage the largest airlift in history, transporting some 2.3 million tons of supplies into West Berlin on more than 270,000 flights in an operation that lasted nearly a year before Stalin relented.

Workers' strike. The next major event in Berlin was the workers strike of 1953. On June 10, 1953, Communist Party Secretary Walter Ulbricht raised production quotas for factory and construction workers by a whopping 10 percent. East German workers did not have the machinery or the raw materials to make possible such an increase, even if they had had the energy. Ulbricht had that figured out. If the quota was a hundred units and an individual worker produced ninety units, his wages were correspondingly reduced.

The first reaction came on June 11, when the trade union at a construction site in East Berlin called a twenty-four hours strike.

On the morning of Tuesday, June 16th, workers in East Berlin marched toward government and Party offices. They demolished two propaganda broadcast trucks and commandeered a third from which they broadcast their own messages, including "We demand free elections and a united Berlin." The workers called for a general strike the following day.

The following day the workers went on strike and the Soviets responded, sending tanks and troops from all over East Germany. Three hundred Berliners were killed and over 1,000 injured. Riots broke out in other East German cities over the next few days, but they were smothered as quickly.

Voting with their feet. Brutally repressed and denied the free elections they desired, East Germans began voting with their feet. After the 1953 uprising the trickle of East Germans giving up their possessions to move to the west turned into a steady stream and then a mighty river. In 1959 an

average of 7,500 East Germans a month applied for asylum at the Marienfelde refugee center in West Berlin, and the great airlift of 1948 was reenacted, except this time the planes were filled with refugees moving to West Germany. By 1960, the number of refugees rose to 12,600 a month, and Walter Ulbricht decided East Germany could not live with the continuing human drainage.

Getting approval. Before building the wall, Ulbricht needed Soviet approval, and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev was reluctant to give it. The allies had every legal right to oppose any physical barrier within Berlin, and the tough talking Khrushchev was aware of consequences. At a May 1960 political rally in East Berlin, he said “We are realists and will not pursue an adventurous policy.”

Three things likely changed Khrushchev’s mind. The first was JFK’s botched Bay of Pigs invasion that revealed a lack of resolve on JFK’s part. The second thing came just six weeks later when the U.S. president hurtled head-first into another disaster: his first and only summit with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev. The June 1961 summit meeting in Vienna did not go well for JFK. “Worst thing in my life,” Kennedy told a New York Times reporter. “He savaged me.” Khrushchev agreed, describing Kennedy as weak and inexperienced compared to Eisenhower. The third thing was that the flow of Germans from the east could no longer be ignored. In June 1961, twenty thousand easterners went west.

On August 4th Ulbricht flew to Moscow to brief Warsaw Pact leaders on his plans to build a wall. The leaders were sympathetic with East Germany’s problems but wanted no part of a military confrontation with the western powers. Khrushchev came up with the compromise solution

Ulbricht should order his troops, at X Hour, to begin stringing the barbed wire.

But if the allies responded with force, East German troops were to drop back.

Ulbricht returned to Berlin to make final plans. Besides the considerable logistical issues, timing was important. The wall could not be installed while the Grenzgänger, East Germans with jobs in the West, were at work in West Berlin or in transit. The work had to be done at night, and the most logical day would be Sunday.

Just after midnight on Sunday, August 13th East Germany halted all trains between East and West Berlin and closed the border crossings. At 1:00 am they began work on the wall, and at 2:00 am they announced that the border was permanently closed. By sunrise the wall, mostly barbed wire, was in place and a major turning point in the cold war was a fait accompli. The Western Powers did nothing.

Part II: Living with the Wall

A great many things happened in Berlin between 1961 and 1989 – too many to cover in this paper – so I’ll just try to cover the great confrontation of October 1961, two great speeches, two ways of getting out of East Berlin, and a comment on life east of the wall.

The confrontation of October 1961. To signal American and Allied determination to maintain access rights, the U.S. Army moved ten M-48A1 tanks and three M-59 armored personnel carriers to the Friedrichstrasse Crossing Point, better known as Checkpoint Charlie, usually manned only by U.S. Army military policemen, on October 26, 1961. The next day Soviet tanks moved into opposing positions. With the attention of the world fixed on Berlin, American and Soviet tanks, barely one hundred yards apart,

faced each other for more than 24 hours with their main guns trained on each other. At the same time, American military and diplomatic personnel with military police escorts continued to move through the checkpoint, exercising their rights to travel into the Soviet sector. On the morning of the 28th Soviet tanks withdrew. Shortly afterwards, the U.S. armor pulled back. The stand-off at Checkpoint Charlie was over, but the allies had finally taken a stand.

The first great speech. JFK in 1963

JFK's speech at the Berlin City Hall in June of 1963 is famous, mainly for the last line when he says "Ich bin ein Berliner." An urban myth has gone around suggesting Kennedy's line was a gaffe, and that Berliners laughed at him because the line in German meant "I am a jelly doughnut." This is completely false. While it is true that a German from Berlin would normally omit the definite article and say "Ich bin Berliner," there is nothing grammatically wrong with the way Kennedy said it. And while it is true that "Berliner" can be a fruit-filled pastry, not one of the many thousands who heard Kennedy's speech that day was confused or amused about what he said. They did not laugh; on the contrary, they roared their approval.

An excerpt from the speech, including some German sentences, is worth repeating:

"There are many people in the world who really don't understand, or say they don't, what is the great issue between the free world and the Communist world. Let them come to Berlin. There are some who say that communism is the wave of the future. Let them come to Berlin. And there are some who say in Europe and elsewhere we can work with the Communists. Let them come to Berlin. And there are even a few who say that it is true that communism is an evil system, but it permits us to make economic progress. Lass' sie nach Berlin kommen. Let them come to Berlin."

Kennedy concluded: "All free men, wherever they may live, are citizens of Berlin, and, therefore, as a free man, I take pride in the words "Ich bin ein Berliner."

The second great speech. Reagan in 1987

Like Kennedy's, Reagan's speech is best remembered for its last line when he said "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall." But the rest of the speech is important, as was its context. It came on June 12, 1987, at a time when Mikhail Gorbachev was promoting liberalization through Glasnost and Perestroika (openness and restructuring). Moreover, the speech was delivered at the Brandenburg Gate, and it was amplified on both sides of the wall and broadcast on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Listen to his words: "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!"

Two ways of getting out of East Berlin: Escape and Ransom.

At first, the wall proved to be very porous. All that was needed was to leap over the barbed wire or find a spot where the border police were not watching.

Over time, the East Germans worked steadily to improve their anti-fascist protective rampart. First they replaced the barbed wire with concrete, followed by construction of watchtowers. By the end of 1961, the watchtowers numbered 130. Five years later there were 210 of them. By 1989 there were 279.

The death strip was gradually extended until it was two hundred yards wide in places, and the wall was redesigned to make it virtually impossible to climb.

East Germans kept finding new ways to escape, and their government kept finding ways to stop them, including shooting them dead. The official number killed is 140, but a new German study done by a team at the Free University of Berlin has put at 327 the number of people killed at the East German border during the Cold War. The 327 includes 262 who died at the Berlin Wall, and 24 East German border guards who were shot while on duty.

About half of those who died were aged 18-25. The youngest was a baby who suffocated in the trunk of a car in 1977. Many of the victims were shot by East German guards, drowned trying to swim to the West, or set off anti-personnel mines. About 10% of those who died were women.

There is no point in apologizing for the slaughter at the wall, but there are other stories. After the wall fell, many stories emerged about border guards and even members of the Stazi (Ministry for State Security) who aided and abetted the escapees. The shoot to kill order was reprehensible, but many stories have emerged about border guards who displayed astonishingly poor marksmanship in carrying out the order. In some cases hundreds of shots were fired and nobody was harmed.

Another way of getting out of East Berlin was to simply pay ransom (freikauf) to the East Germans who needed the money. In exchange for cash or credits for badly needed goods, East Germany would release individual political prisoners designated by the West German government.

In August 1962 the first dozen ransomed prisoners were taken by bus from East to West Germany. Freikauf became big business. In twenty-six years it effected the release of 25,000 political prisoners, for whom the West paid a total of 5 billion marks or about 2 billion dollars.

Life in the East.

There is also no point in apologizing for the East German regime. Some reports say up to 1 in 70 East Germans was an informant for the Stazi. Slight infractions could result in harsh punishment, and political prisoners were routinely tortured. But many Germans who lived in the East have fond memories of their lives there.

Angela Merkle, who joined the center-right Christian Democrats exactly because she had had her fill of socialist experiments, is one of these. Growing up a pastor's child in atheist East Germany, she had a surprisingly happy childhood. She remembers many happy times with her family, her friends, her school mates, and her work colleagues. She received an excellent education, learned to speak fluent Russian (a skill that served her well in negotiations with Vladimir Putin), and earned a PhD in Physics.

Is it not ironic that her upbringing in East Germany prepared Angela to become the first woman chancellor in a country that had never before had a queen or any woman political leader of note? At one point this former East German became the world's strongest proponent of liberal democracy, fiercely confronting aggressive authoritarians from Putin to Trump.

Merkle was not the only East German who found some facets of East German life tolerable. According to a poll conducted by the German magazine Der Spiegel twenty years after unification half of all East Germans thought many aspects of life were better behind the wall. People were poor, but having that in common brought them together somehow. Crime was nearly unknown, as was homelessness.

Part III: Is the wall really gone?

Twenty-eight years is a long time for a country to be divided and governed by entirely different political and economic systems. Differences between East and West Germany clearly remain.

Some of the remaining differences can be traced to the long period separation. For example, Angela Merkle has remarked that things they were taught led West and East Germans to have an entirely different views of the holocaust. East German school children were taught about the communist victims of concentration camps; Jews were hardly mentioned. This could be why anti-Semitism, while illegal throughout Germany, is much more wide-spread in the former East German areas.

But decisions and events after the wall fell are responsible for major differences between the former East and West Germanys.

Let's start with the economy. Thirty-two years after the so called unification, the former East German states lag seriously behind the West in wealth, income, employment, and productivity. No major German companies are located in the East except in Berlin itself, and branches of German firms are more often than not managed by people from the West.

Why isn't the East doing better? Why didn't the economic miracle that happened in West Germany after 1945 happen in the East after 1989? The answers are not simple, but many economists believe the wounds were self-inflicted and had to do with exchange rates.

Upon adoption of the Deutschmark in East Germany on 1 July 1990, the East German mark was converted to Deutschmarks at par for wages, prices and basic savings (up to a limit of 4,000 Marks per person, except a smaller number for children and a larger number for pensioners). Larger amounts of savings, company debts and housing loans were converted at a 2:1 rate whilst so-called "speculative money", acquired shortly before unification, was converted at a rate of 3:1.

On the black market, the exchange rate was about 5 to 10 East Marks to one Deutschmark. In the mid-1980s, one could easily visit foreign currency exchange offices in West Berlin and purchase East German banknotes at a rate of 5 to 1. In East Berlin, if you dared, you could get as many as 10 East Marks for every Deutschmark.

These inflated exchange rates were intended by the West German government as a massive subsidy for East Germany. Instead, they increased the disruption caused by German unification by, among other things, making East German industries uncompetitive.

With the labor costs of West Germany and the labor productivity of Portugal, East German companies simply could not compete; nor could they attract foreign investment needed to modernize. One after another, East German businesses failed, and the workers, particularly women, moved to the West. East German workers, particularly men, became unemployed, resentful, and lonely.

The economic problems and critical needs for infrastructure in the East were addressed by imposing a “solidarity tax” on the West, leading to resentment there.

Other differences. Over the years I’ve read many articles purporting to analyze differences in thinking between East and West Germans. Many are sensationalized with headlines like “East Germans Want their Wall Back,” or “West Germans Fed Up with Supporting Lazy Easterners.” Fortunately, voting data and responsible polling exist.

Three decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall, people in former West and East Germany generally say the unification of their country was a positive development, according to a 2019 Pew Research Center survey. Large majorities in both areas say the changes that have unfolded in Germany since 1989 have had a good influence on living standards, health care and national pride, and most also see improvements in areas including family values, spiritual values and law and order.

Despite these widespread positive sentiments among Germans about the changes of the past 30 years, the perspectives of those in the former West and East still differ starkly in some notable ways. Here is a look at some of the areas where these differences are most pronounced.

1. Politics. East Germans are much more attracted to the fringes of the political spectrum. People living in the former East are twice as likely as those in the former West to have a favorable opinion of the country’s right-wing populist party, Alternative for Germany (AfD). Meanwhile, those in the former East are more likely than those in the former West (44% vs. 36%) to have a favorable view of The Left party, a successor to the East German Communist Party.
2. Democracy in General. When it comes to the way Germany’s democracy is working, around two-thirds of those in the former West (66%) are satisfied, compared with a narrower 55% majority among those in the former East.
3. The future. On a variety of measures, those in the former West are more optimistic about the future than their counterparts in the former East. More in the former West say they are more optimistic than pessimistic when it comes to the education system (57% optimistic vs. 41% pessimistic) and how the nation’s political system works (53% vs. 45%).
4. Religion. Religion is more important to people in the former West than those in the former East. Six-in-ten adults in former West Germany say religion is very or somewhat important in their lives, whereas

an identical share of those in former East Germany say religion is not too or not at all important. This includes 45% of those in the former East who say religion is not at all important in their lives.

5. Muslims and Jews. People living in the former East are 14 percentage points more likely than their Western counterparts to have an unfavorable view of Muslims (36% vs. 22%) and about twice as likely to have an unfavorable view of Jews (12% vs. 5%).

6. Economy. People in the former West are more likely than those in the former East (50% vs. 42%) to say children today will be better off financially than their parents when they grow up.

Conclusion/Opinion

The title of this paper states a rhetorical question. Is the Berlin Wall long gone? I've come to the conclusion that it is not long gone, certainly not in Germany and probably not in the rest of the world either. It lives in memory, stands as a warning against oppressive government, and influences attitudes about a wide range of issues.

How long will it take for the wall to fade away as a factor in German lives? If the United States is a guide, it could take a hundred years. Has the Confederacy faded away as a factor in American life? How can one explain the presence today of Confederate battle flags on vehicles, in parades, and (until recently) on state capitol buildings?

Forced political and social divisions have consequences that are slow to fade away.

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Background of the Author

Born in Chicago and raised in Southern California, Robert Dawes has lived in Redlands on and off since 1987. Robert and his wife Cheri enjoy the town and try to take advantage of all it has to offer.

Afflicted with chronic volunteerism, Robert takes great pleasure in serving the Redlands community. He is president of the Redlands Conservancy, treasurer of the Redlands Symphony Association, treasurer of the Armantrout Montessori Education Foundation, and a member of the Redlands Community Foundation Board. His past service includes being president of the Redlands Bowl and treasurer of the University of Redlands Town & Gown.

Robert is a Certified Public Accountant and has a Masters in International Business. Before his retirement in 2008, he served as Auditor General of the US Air Force at the Pentagon.

Although officially retired, Robert has two jobs. In 2012, he was elected as Redlands City Treasurer; he was reelected in 2016 and 2020. He has also been an adjunct professor of accounting at the University of Redlands since 2016.

Abstract

Constructed in August 1961, the Berlin wall divided Germany's capitol and came to symbolize the Cold War for the 28 years of its existence. The title of this paper states a rhetorical question. Is the Berlin Wall long gone? The author concludes that it is not long gone, certainly not in Germany and probably not in the rest of the world either. It lives in memory, stands as a warning against oppressive government, and influences attitudes about a wide range of issues.