

The Berlin Wall, 1961-1989

An Honors Thesis (ID 499)

by

Travis J. LeMaster

Nancy Nicas

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Ball State University

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The Berlin Wall

The German language is haunted by the word "Mauer", or "Wall", much in the same way as it is by the word "Nazi." (Ryback 23) From its erection in the early morning hours of August 13, 1961 until its dismantling on November 9-10, 1989, the Berlin Wall stood as the ultimate symbol of the Cold War in Europe, a painful reminder to the German people of Germany's past and of its division after the Second World War into the Federal Republic of Germany (F.R.G.) and the German Democratic Republic (G.D.R.). For those Germans hoping to forget the scars of the war, the Wall remained an open wound that would not heal.

The construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961 was an act of desperation by the G.D.R. government. The building of the Wall exposed the economic weaknesses and the political instabilities that existed within the G.D.R. borders, rather than showing the government's strength by stopping the flow of refugees. These weaknesses in the structure of the G.D.R. society were not remedied by the Wall, instead they were exaggerated because of the G.D.R.'s isolation from the the West caused by the Wall. As the socio-economic and political inequalities between the peoples of the F.R.G. and the G.D.R. continued to grow, so did the feelings of discontent among G.D.R. citizens. This dissent, directed towards the goals of political and economic equality, led to the downfall of the G.D.R. government and the Berlin Wall in 1989. After 28 years, the circumstances that caused the G.D.R. government originally to

construct the Wall were the same ones which caused it to fall.

In dividing up the spoils of war, the four victorious allies: the United States, the Soviet Union, Great Britain and France, divided up the German Reich into four separate occupation zones. Berlin, as the capital of the Reich, became the focal point of East-West tensions after the war. The city of Berlin was likewise divided into four zones, even though the city itself lay deep within the Soviet zone of divided Germany. As the war ended and the period of reconstruction in Europe began, tensions between the Soviet Union and the rest of the Allies began to threaten the spirit of cooperation that had enabled the Allies to defeat Hitler's armies.

As the Soviet Union began to solidify its hold over the nations of Eastern Europe in the late 1950s, the citizens in the French, British and American sectors of Berlin began to fear that they would be swallowed up under the growing wave of "Sovietization". The Allied powers, concerned that the Soviet Union would try to force them out of the Western sector of Berlin, began to prepare for the worst. When the Soviets and the newly formed German Democratic Republic tried to blockade West Berlin in 1948, the Allies responded with a massive airlift that saved the city from starvation. The feeling among West Berliners was that the United States and the rest of the Western Allies would back up the people of West Berlin's right to freedom and self-determination, and would protect them from the G.D.R. and the Soviet Union.

Because of its special relationship with the West, West Berlin was seen as an irritant to the G.D.R. and the Soviet Union. It was a relatively open outlet for emigration, and its proximity to Poland

meant that its radio (and later television) transmissions could reach large areas of the G.D.R. and the Eastern bloc. West Berlin's location in the heart of the G.D.R. gave the Western military an access point behind Warsaw Pact frontlines. (Francisco 10)

The Soviet Union demanded that the G.D.R. accept none of the aid from the Marshall Plan offered by the United States, and the Eastern economy was denied investment capital that was badly needed to stimulate their war torn economy. The continuing economic problems in the G.D.R. led to a workers' uprising in East Berlin on June 17, 1953, with workers marching through the Brandenburg Gate into West Berlin in protest. (Francisco 7) Suffering from the Soviet Union's policy of dismantling and removing industrial plants from the G.D.R. soil, the economy of the East severely lacked the base that the West had. Many East Germans, upset with the Soviet and G.D.R. policies, fled to the West through the city of West Berlin.

"Between 1949, when the German Democratic Republic was founded, and 1961, when the Wall was built, 2,800,000 people, one in every six, had abandoned East Germany for the West. (Gelb 63)" This population drain amounted to nearly 20 per cent of the entire population of the G.D.R. (Francisco 12) The flood of refugees to the West steadily increased year after year, and was always in the hundreds of thousands. The East Germans who rejected their new regime for the West didn't always do so for purely political reasons.

Wages were higher in West Berlin, and the long term prospects for life in the West were much better than in the G.D.R. (Mander 62)

Chancellor Konrad Adenauer of West Germany, to the displeasure of the United States, visited the Soviet Union in 1955 and exchanged

formal diplomatic recognition with the Soviet Union. (Francisco 9) By doing so, Adenauer had in effect accepted the division of Germany into the F.R.G. and the G.D.R. , and did nothing to calm the growing insecurities of the citizens of West Berlin. West Germany's recognition by the Soviet Union was seen as an obstacle in its goal for reunification. (Windsor 192)

President Kennedy of the U.S. stressed the continued presence of the Western powers in West Berlin and the freedom of the West Berliners to determine their own government. (Francisco 13) The preferential treatment they received from the West made the West Berliners feel a bit more secure and was an irritation to the Soviet Union and the G.D.R. The East Germans saw in West Berlin a glimmer of hope and freedom, both economically and politically. Those East Germans who left through West Berlin made their way to the city by train, and either settled there or flew on to West Germany, where they were aided by the West German government. (Gelb 44)

The transition to socialism was going badly for the East Germans. East Berliners were becoming Grenzgänger by the thousands, crossing the border into West Berlin to work, but continuing to live in the East. (Francisco 7) In East Berlin, 45,000 jobs sat vacant while approximately 53,000 East Berliners were crossing the border to work each day. (Paterson 18) The Grenzgänger were being paid in hard currency from the West, earning sums that were impossible for them to reach in the East. By choosing to work in the West, the Grenzgänger deprived East Germany of badly needed services and contributed to the country's growing economic problems. (Gelb 69) The Grenzgänger were not highly regarded by those in West Berlin

either, who thought that the workers were exploiting the political situation in Berlin. (Gelb 70)

The G.D.R. increased the problem of refugee flow considerably by their announcement of the planned collectivization of agriculture, and rumors that the border with the West might soon be closed. As the flood of refugees increased, the facilities in West Berlin and West Germany to accommodate the large numbers were nearly overwhelmed as more refugees fled. (Francisco 12)

At a meeting of the Warsaw Treaty Organization in March of 1961, Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet leader, is reported to have told Walter Ulbricht, the Chairman of the Council of State of the G.D.R., that internal mechanisms should be used to stop the flow of refugees through West Berlin. (Merritt 45) As late as July, the number of refugees were approaching nearly 1,000 a day. (Francisco 13) The Soviet Union resisted the pleas of the G.D.R. for a separate peace treaty from the war and for aid in ending the flow of refugees. The Soviets were content at the moment to allow the refugee problem to be one that Walter Ulbricht and the G.D.R. had to deal with alone.

"Between August 1 and August 8, inclusive, there were 10,979 refugees. Since over 60 per cent of the refugees were young and middle aged men, the working force was so depleted that the exodus of another 200,000 workers from the G.D.R. would have wrecked its entire economy. (Keller 74)" In the early morning of August 13, 1961, the G.D.R. took action to protect itself from the mass emigration. East Berlin police and the East Germany army units sealed off the border with West Berlin, and began constructing a barricade of barbed wire through the center of Berlin. As the city lay sleeping, the Eastern

half was sealed off from the Western half.

The division of Berlin was a desperate attempt by the East German government to save itself from economic ruin. According to the history of the SED (Socialist Unity Party) of East Germany, the actions of August 13, 1961 were justified because "the borders of the socialist world were reliably defended against the main forces of world imperialism in Europe and the sovereignty of the G.D.R. was secured. (McAdams 9)" These security measures were key steps on the road from cold war to international detente. (Heitzer 127)

The Wall in Berlin was not a planned occurrence, but rather a desperate act that signaled weakness, not strength, by the East German government. (McAdams 10) The idea of a detente with the West German government disturbed the leaders of East Germany because such actions threatened to undermine the leadership's attempts to build and maintain domestic authority within their borders. (McAdams 5) For Moscow, the building of the Wall in 1961 was an embarrassing concession to Walter Ulbricht. (Francisco 17)

For the West, the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961 made the prospects of German reunification seem remote, if not unlikely. (Moreton 99) Many West Berliners felt that the Western powers, particularly the United States, had abandoned them. Yet, "the date and time were obviously chosen to give the operation the maximum degree of surprise and to minimize the possibility of prompt and effective counteraction from the West. (Slusser 129)" Western observers had predicted that the communists wouldn't bring the German issue to a head until November. ("Waiting" 119)

Any possibility of reaching an accord within the city had ended

in 1949, with the founding of the F.R.G. and the G.D.R. (Keithly 5) Since the 1950s, Walter Ulbricht had insisted upon the absolute neutrality of Berlin. If he could not control West Berlin, then neither could the West. (McAdams 19) Khrushchev was able to use the Berlin question to force the West to acknowledge that a shift in the balance of power towards the Soviet Union had occurred. (Slusser 9) "As West Germany came into existence as the child of the Cold War, so West Berlin had become a sort of pawn of great power rivalry. (Keithly 17)"

The West was caught off guard by the building of the Wall, but it's hands were tied as far as what action it could take. The West was determined not to risk war over Berlin, but wanted to stand firm in the defense of Western rights with the Soviets. There also was the fear that the Soviets might gain more if the United States and the West negotiated. (Slusser 134) The Soviets, with the erection of the Wall, were able to create a situation where the majority of risk was on the side of the Western Allies. (Windsor 202) To those who lived in Berlin, whether East or West, the lack of action by the West was seen as desertion in their time of need.

The resulting stalemate in Berlin between the superpowers forced the people of the divided city to accept the Wall that separated them from jobs, relatives and freedom. As a West Berlin school teacher stated, "The Wall is the price we pay for Hitler and the Nazis. I am afraid it will take a war to bring it down. The Wall is monstrous, but it is better than a war. (Gelb 288)" A majority of Germans were more concerned with economic survival than they were with the political games played by the United States and the Soviet Union.

The most serious problems created by the construction of the Wall were economic ones. These problems affected West Berlin as well as East Berlin, although the East was more severely affected because of its isolation from Western aid. For West Berlin, the Wall caused the economic loss of about 53,000 Grenzgänger. (Elkins 130) West Berlin was forced to look beyond its borders for new workers for the unskilled jobs that West Germans didn't want. G.D.R. workers, who now had dim hopes for emigration, began to try to build up the economic base that the G.D.R. had previously lacked. After the construction of the Wall, Western observers began to speak of the Eastern "economic miracle" of East Germany in the 1960s. (Francisco 16)

This boom of the East German economy caused by the construction of the Wall was short lived, however. "In 1960, the G.D.R. worker achieved 76 per cent of the West German real income level, in 1969 61 per cent and in 1972 only 55 per cent. (Schneider 58)" Clearly, the goals of socialism had not been able to keep pace with the market economy of the West. According to a U.S. News & World Report article, East Germans are at least 20 years behind West Germans in economic development. Although their standard of living is the highest in Eastern Europe, it is only half that of West Berlin alone or West Germany. ("Berlin" 32) The net real income of the average G.D.R. household is only about half of that of its West German counterpart. (Childs 196) Although the economy is not as bad as that of neighboring Poland, the country is in the midst of a serious economic crisis. "Given the Soviet Union's present stance, the G.D.R.'s only conceivable source for future resources seems to be the

West, especially West Germany. (Childs 199)"

West Berlin, on the other hand, "constitutes the largest economic metropolis between Paris and Moscow, and the most agglomerated and most differentiated industrial complex in all of Europe. (Hillenbrand 181)" West Berlin's mixed economy allows it to survive economically deep within the G.D.R. "Over four-fifths of all goods produced in [West] Berlin are sold in West Germany. (Lukomski 23B)" West Berlin's income tax rate is 30 per cent lower than that in the F.R.G. proper, but the city has had less success than hoped for in attracting skilled labor. ("High Hopes" 32) West Berlin's population has shrunk by some 300,000 in the last 20 years, and one person in four is a pensioner. ("Why" 35) The industrial sector has been the most affected by the isolation of West Berlin from the rest of the F.R.G. "Berlin economists are most worried by the dramatic, 45 per cent contraction of manufacturing employment since 1960. (Fairlamb 61)" Several firms have moved their operations inside the Federal Republic or have based most of their work load there, leaving West Berlin to suffer.

According to Gerhard Mensch, the situation of the [West] Berlin economy is better than its reputation, and its image is worse than its reality. (Hillenbrand 153) The most important basis for Berlin's economic power is the export of its products beyond the city. A major problem for the West Berlin economy has been the lack of a market for its goods since the Berlin Wall. Eighty per cent of the city's produce has to be hauled to the Federal Republic for sale. (Fairlamb 61) The cost of transporting goods overland across the G.D.R. increases product cost substantially. "The building of the

Wall ended the flow of East German refugees needed to man the booming West German economy, and the country looked increasingly beyond its borders for new workers, especially unskilled workers willing to accept jobs that Germans did not want. As late as 1965 only one in a hundred employed persons in West Berlin was foreign...by the end of 1982 every eight resident was a foreign. (Merritt 202)" Although Berlin is a dynamic industrial center with a gross domestic product of more than 50 billion Deutsche Marks, "the industrial sector...employs fewer than 168,000 workers as compared with more than 300,000 in 1960. (Lukomski 23B)" Because the unemployment rate in the city has risen to 10.4 per cent, the city has put an end to the hiring of non-European Economic Community workers. (Newcomb 4)

"West Berlin has one of the lowest birth rates in the world, 9.7 births per 1,000 population. (Newcomb 5)" The age structure and the nationality of the population of West Berlin promised to be the crucial part of future development in the city. About 10 per cent of the population are foreigners, half of which are Turks. This growth of the foreign population has meant that every fourth baby born in West Berlin has foreign parents. (Merritt 13B) The population decline in West Berlin has been steady over the past twenty years, from 2.2 million in 1965 to 1.87 million in 1983. (Newcomb 4) The ethnic minorities continue to present problems of assimilation and social adaptation to the German culture. According to the Berlin Information Center, more than one in five children under six years of age has non-German parents. (Newcomb 5)

"The two German states rank lower on the world scale than they did before World War II and their separation. (Moreton 123)"

International debt incurred by the G.D.R. has been a major problem for their economy. A lack of resources and technological progress have created trade problems with both the Soviet Union and West Germany. The Federal Republic was the G.D.R.'s third largest trade partner in the first half of the 1980s. A key factor in the continued economic survival of the G.D.R. has been its special status in trade with the F.R.G. The basis for this status rests in the fact that the G.D.R. is not viewed economically as a foreign country by the F.R.G. (Cornelsen 34) "Inter-German trade was 6.4 per cent of its total with all partners in 1983 and 6.0 per cent in 1984. The Federal Republic and the rest of Western Europe accounted for 98.4 per cent of imports in 1983 from Western industrial partners. (Moreton 125)" "The 1988 real GNP in trillions of U.S. dollars for East Germany was 0.21, for West Germany it was 0.87. ("Two Germanies" A1)"

"The G.D.R.'s foreign policy has two fixed points: on the one side, there are relations with the Soviet Union and, on the other, a special relationship with the Federal Republic of Germany, a relationship which combines antagonism with cooperation." West German transactions constitute about 2.5 per cent of the East German GNP. (Moreton 112) There are benefits that go beyond pure monetary value that result from this inter-German trade. The availability of Western technology, as well as supplies and services that can be provided by West Berlin on short notice are invaluable in countering the shortages in the East.

West Berlin's fear that the city would be abandoned by the West is a central part of the city's problems. "It was the apparent

evidence of this on the part of the United States and the F.R.G. that caused such bitterness in 1961. (Merritt 211)" Yet it is "the normalization of inter-German economic relations (Moreton 128)" that helps to ensure the continued security of West Berlin. The F.R.G. has tried to integrate West Berlin into the Federal Republic politically, economically, socially and constitutionally, because West Berlin is "an important symbol of the reunified Germany that is to be. (Merritt 210)" West Berlin is noticeably hesitant in its dealings with the G.D.R., for fear that if they bypass the formal role of the F.R.G., then the city will be admitting its total independence from West Germany. The visibility of the city's structural intergration into the Federal Republic is strengthened by West Berlin's ties to the F.R.G. through the European Economic Community. (Merritt 215) "If West Berlin had not been included, the city would have faced barriers to its trade with the European Community as a whole and even with its natural and primary economic partner, the Federal Republic. (Francisco 42)"

For all of its economic problems, there are some SED loyalists who believe that "by applying Gorbachev's principles 'creatively', the G.D.R. could become an attractive place to be. (Childs 17)" East German economic success has been achieved without departure from the Soviet-defined course, making it one of the most successful economies of the Eastern bloc. (Childs 195) However, the SED leadership has been reluctant to engage in the Soviet-style reforms of the Gorbachev era. (Childs 20) It was this lack of willingness to change the existing system that eventually led to the downfall of the SED leadership under Erich Honecker in late 1989. It was growing

increasingly hard for the communist regime to maintain its authoritarian nature in the late 1980s, especially for a country that had been exposed to the outside influences of West German television and millions of visitors. "Honecker's refusal to follow Gorbachev's new course had left the ranks of the party ideologically disorientated. (Minnerup 673)"

The holes in the Berlin Wall holding back thousands of East Germans began appearing in September 1989. Thousands of G.D.R. citizens who had obtained travel visas to Hungary and had decided to stay in the country began entering the F.R.G. on September 10, 1989, when Hungary declared that its border with the West would be open. By October, over 25,000 East Germans had crossed over into the West. These East Germans, who had been inspired by the changes in socialism in the Soviet Union under Gorbachev, were disillusioned by SED-chief Erich Honecker's refusal to implement reforms.

To celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the G.D.R.'s founding, Mikhail Gorbachev visited Honecker in East Berlin on October 7. ("Genosse" 1) During Gorbachev's visit, thousands of prodemocracy demonstrators clashed with police in East Berlin, Leipzig and Potsdam. Honecker stood firm on the stance that he would preserve the basic values of socialism in the G.D.R. Honecker's stance on reform continued to draw criticism from within the Politburo of the G.D.R.

During October, thousands of East Germans made their way to the F.R.G. on freedom trains through Czechoslovakia and Poland. ("Zug" 1)

East Germans continued to take their protest movement to the street, and Honecker resigned from power on October 18. Egon Krenz

was chosen to replace Honecker, and stated that he was a Communist first and a German second, and that the Berlin Wall would stand. Over 300,000 demonstrators marched in Leipzig on October 23, demanding freedom and economic reform from the G.D.R. government.

Krenz was as unsuccessful in dealing with the demonstrators as Honecker had been. November 4, 1989 saw the largest demonstration against the government ever in the G.D.R. in East Berlin, with over one million participants. ("Gesprach" 1) Although he eased the border restrictions for those East Germans wanting to leave the country, the Berlin Wall still remained as an obstacle in his attempts to calm the dissent.

On November 9, 1989, the first of the East Berliners crossed into West Berlin at Bornholmer Strasse. (Owen 20) "The night of Friday, November 10, [1989] the East Germans began smashing through the Wall. By November 14 there were 22 new crossing points, with promises of more to come. (Hope 14)" The building tide of resentment over the government's refusal to budge on its tight economic policies had forced to downfall of one government under Honecker, and was threatening the survival of another under Egon Krenz. "By opening the borders, however, the new East German leadership has removed in a single bold stroke the principal cause of discontent: the feeling of imprisonment and isolation, the despair that nothing would ever change for the better. (Minnerup 672)"

Despite the East German crisis, the dismantling of the Wall after 28 years caught the West off guard almost as much as its erection did. "The dawn of the post Wall era marks the beginnings of the end of the post war settlement in Europe. (Minnerup 674)" But

the questions and problems that faced East and West Berlin in 1949 and 1961 are still present today. In 1964, Otto Von der Glabentz stated that "a reunification of Germany on the basis of self-determination would make Berlin the capital of a free Germany. (Von der Glabentz 43)" Today, the prospect exists that Berlin would again be the capital of Germany, although it remains to be seen if it will be the economic, political or the symbolic capital of a reunified German state.

President Bush called the opening of the Berlin Wall as a "good development", and the U.S. Defense Secretary, Dick Cheney, stated "that the odds of using military forces in East Germany against the West appeared to be significantly lower now than at any time in the postwar period. (Freidman A16)" The reaction from the Soviet Union was cautious, with a statement that radical changes would be tolerated as long as East Germany remained a member nation of the Warsaw Pact. (Fein A16)

Hungarian statisticians F. Janossy and E. Ehrlich have developed a technique for computing GNP's for the U.N. Economic Commission for Europe that shows that the West German per capita income is 1.69 times that of the G.D.R. (Moreton 133) The official rate of dollars per unit of Ost Mark is 0.54, but on the black market it falls to only 0.04. (Riemer 65) As the wall crumbled, so did the pretense that East bloc governments could hold their currencies at ridiculously overvalued rates. As West Germany begins to finance Eastern European ventures, the West German Mark is likely to become the staple currency of Eastern Europe. (Riemer 65) Kraft Holtz, who runs a London forecasting and consulting firm, predicts that "come the year

2000, the East German economy will be almost indistinguishable from the West Germany economy. ("Two Germanies" A1)"

In relation to the current East-West economic situation, there is no better place to be than in West Berlin. ("High Hopes" 36) "The mark already serves as the anchor for the nine nation European Monetary System. (Riemer 65)" "Just since mid-November's opening of the Berlin Wall, the West German mark has jumped 8 per cent against the U.S. dollar and 10 per cent against the Japanese yen...at 1.71 marks to the dollar, the mark is now worth 16 per cent more than it was last spring. (Riemer 40)" In the future, the economic relationship between West Berlin and the G.D.R. should increase, (Moreton 174) especially if the Deutsche Mark replaces the dollar as the hard currency of the East. If this occurs, West Germany's power to control currency values and interest rates throughout Europe will be unchallenged.

"The West German government persists in striving towards reunification, if not immediately, then eventually; it envisions Berlin as the capital of a reunified Germany. (Merritt 209)" There are those West German Social Democrats who foresee Berlin as a "bridge of peace between East and West, no longer sundered from its socialist 'umland'. (Elkins 251)" "Failing a crackdown by the East German government, significant economic integration between the two Germanies could well occur even if their political systems remain at odds for years. ("Two Germanies" A1)" According to Andrei Markowitz, the East Germans no longer have a DRANG NACH OSTEN, but a DRANG NACH WESTEN. (Liscio 9)

German reunification remains a central issue of concern among

both Germanies and the rest of Europe. NATO and the Warsaw Pact powers are concerned about the place of a reunited Germany in the power blocs of Europe. The issue is "whether the new Germany will be in the West's Atlantic house, Gorbachev's European house or back in the middle. (Odom 36)" Hans Modrow, the new Prime Minister of the G.D.R. and the leading reformer of the Communist Party, has proposed a plan for a neutral Germany that would have Berlin as its capital, but F.R.G. Chancellor Helmut Kohl rejected the idea of German neutrality. (Yalowitz 41) The idea of a neutral Germany is not dead in the F.R.G., however, having appeared in the platforms of the SPD and the Greens Party. (Odom 36)

In West Germany, "there is a long standing phobia that the Soviet Union will tempt West Germany into neutralism by dangling the carrot of German reunification. (Mortimer 31)" Yet according to Markowitz, Gorbachev is willing to forego the Soviet's most important gain of World War II for a neutral Germany outside of NATO. (Liscio 8) The issue of reunification in the future seems to be one that the Germans themselves must first deal with alone, outside of the influences of the superpowers. Moscow and Washington are not the key players that they were in 1961. Today they are bystanders to the unfolding drama.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall the prospect of German reunification is becoming a reality. The East German economy needs capital from the West, and the West Germans need the cheap labor force and new markets that unity with the East would provide. Historically there has been a push for unity of the ethnic German populations, and with the Berlin Wall now gone this dream can be

realized. The lesson of the Berlin Wall has been that a political reaction such as the building of the Wall cannot hide or eliminate the social and economic problems of a country. The Cold War has finally begun to thaw, and the era of mistrust between the East and West caused by the Wall has ended. The G.D.R.'s construction of the Berlin Wall was only a brief aberration in the history of unity among the German people, who are once again working together to build a better future for themselves and the rest of Europe.

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