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DOI 10.48261/INRR240603

# THE BERLIN WALL FOUNDATION

## **Abstract**

The Berlin Wall Foundation is the central memorial to the history of the division of Germany after the Second World War into the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) and the German Democratic Republic (East Germany). Its key object is the Berlin Wall, which was built by the Communist Regime in 1961 as the 'Anti-Fascist Protection Rampart' (*Anti-faschistischer Schutzwall*), actually intended to prevent the own population of East German citizens from fleeing to the West. The border barriers in Berlin continued to be developed and perfected. Between 1961 and 1989, 140 people died at the Berlin Wall alone. The 2008-founded Berlin Wall Foundation therefore manages several sites relating to the division of Berlin, including the Berlin Wall Memorial, the East Side Gallery and the Marienfelde Refugee Centre Memorial. Its mission is to research, document and communicate the history of the division and to enable the victims of communist tyranny to be commemorated with dignity. The article not only conveys the history of the Berlin Wall and its peaceful fall, but also presents the core tasks of the foundation and its memorial sites.

**Keywords:** Berlin Wall, Berlin Wall Foundation, Communist regime, East Side Gallery, Victims of Berlin Wall, Marienfelde Refugee Centre Memorial, Parliament of Trees against War and Violence, Günter Litfin Memorial, Checkpoint Charlie, Commemoration

## Stiftung Berliner Mauer: History and Mission

The Berlin Wall Foundation was established by the State of Berlin on 17 September 2008 as a foundation with legal capacity under public law. Its purpose is to document and communicate the history of the Berlin Wall and the escape movements from the German Democratic Republic as part and consequence of the division of Germany and the Cold War, to preserve its historical sites and authentic traces and to enable a dignified commemoration of the victims of communist tyranny. The foundation is jointly financed by the State of Berlin and the Federal Republic of Germany.

Since its establishment, the Berlin Wall Foundation has included the Berlin Wall Memorial on Bernauer Straße and the Marienfelde Refugee Centre. In 2017, the Günter Litfin Memorial in the watchtower of the former command centre of the GDR Border Troops (*Grenztruppen*) at Kieler Eck was added. Since 2018, the foundation has also been responsible for the East Side Gallery, the longest remaining section of the Berlin Wall between Berlin Ostbahnhof and Oberbaumbrücke, and since 2021, the Parliament of Trees against War and Violence (*Parlament der Bäume gegen Krieg und Gewalt*) in Berlin's government district. The foundation is also developing a concept for an educational and memorial site at the former Checkpoint Charlie (site of the checkpoint in Friedrichstraße between the US and Soviet occupation zones of Berlin). All of the Foundation's historical sites are central places of remembrance of the division of Berlin and Germany (see *Die Berliner Mauer. Ausstellungskatalog* 2015; von Arnim-Rosenthal and Haubold-Stolle 2022; as well as the Berlin Wall Foundation's website). They have all grown out of civic engagement – these origins form the basis of the Foundation's development.

In addition to historical issues, the Foundation's various historical sites enable a differentiated, present-day examination of borders and border regimes, migration, the rule of law, a space for concerns about individual and human rights issues. They illustrate the serious social consequences of totalitarian rule and the value of a pluralistic society.

The sites of remembrance and experience under the care of the Foundation are intended to be open places for encounter, exchange and discussion, which are intended to serve (self-)reflection and dialogue. Here, interested parties can discover contemporary history in its local and global dimensions.

## The Berlin Wall

The Berlin Wall was a 155 km barrier that surrounded West Berlin from 13 August 1961 to 9 November 1989, and cut a swathe through the entire city centre. The Wall was intended to prevent people from fleeing the Communist regime from East Berlin to the West (for general information on the entire history of the Wall see *Die Mauer. Errichtung...* 2014; there one may find articles on a fair number of aspects as well as an extensive bibliography).

After the end of World War II in 1945 and ordered by the Soviet occupying power, the ruling Socialist Unity Party of Germany SED (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*), founded in 1946, established a dictatorship in East Germany. Large sections of the East German population did not agree with the new political and economic system and suffered diverse forms of deprivation and persecution. As a result, a rapidly growing movement of refugees began as early as the end of the 1940s, with individual refugees having a mixture of political, economic and personal motives. By August 1961, the GDR had lost one sixth of its population of at least four million people. As the SED had already sealed off the GDR's border with the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) in 1952, the direct route became increasingly dangerous for refugees. Many therefore used the still open sector borders in Berlin to get to West Germany through this last loophole.

On 13 August 1961, the SED began to seal off the borders around West Berlin, first with barbed wire and a few days later with walls. In this way, it tried to put an end to the swelling movement of refugees. At the same time, the SED wanted to stabilise its power and document its sovereignty to the outside world (see Harrison 2003). The SED leadership did not succeed in completely stopping the escape movement with the construction of the Wall. On the contrary as the construction of the Wall had already separated friends and relatives in Berlin, many people, particularly in East Berlin and the surrounding areas, still tried to flee across the border barriers. The SED therefore had them extended so that the simple wall became a complex and deeply staggered system to prevent escape until 1989. The resulting border strip was known in the West as the 'death strip' because 140 people died at the Berlin Wall. In November 1989, the Wall came down, with which the SED had tried to maintain its power in the GDR. The fall of the Wall heralded the end of the SED dictatorship.



The memorial cross in Tiergarten commemorating the building of the Berlin Wall. Photo: Franciszek Dąbrowski, 2019

stationed in the observation towers. At the foot of this fence, spiked mats – so-called area barriers – were often laid out with steel nails pointing upwards to either injure or deter the fleeing person. Once the guard path and control strip had been crossed, vehicle barriers had to be overcome to prevent escape by car or lorry. In the city centre, those obstacles usually consisted of steel barriers welded together from railway tracks and also linked with barbed wire to stop those fleeing on foot. A barrier ditch was often built on the outer ring of the fence. The last obstacle before reaching the West was the 3.60-metre-high border wall.

In some places, dog runs were also installed where guard dogs blocked the way, alerting the border soldiers when a fugitive approached and deterring them from continuing their escape.

At night, the border strip was brightly lit by the lamps of the so-called 'light line' so that the border soldiers could easily detect fleeing people even after sunset: People were clearly visible in front of the white-painted interior of the two walls that bordered the border strip. At regular intervals of approximately 250 metres, there were watchtowers manned by border guards. The towers were positioned

Initially, border soldiers and pioneers erected further barriers behind the border wall – often provisionally – after every successful escape. Since a border area behind the Wall in East Berlin was established in 1963, this area was cordoned off in many places by a fence. In the mid-1960s, a uniform border strip was created, for which residential buildings were demolished. The idea was to create a clear “field of vision and fire” for the border soldiers. In the following years, this border strip was constantly expanded and perfected. In the 1970s, a second wall was added, the *Hinterlandmauer*, which delimited the border strip to East Berlin and the GDR. At the beginning of the 1980s, the first obstacle for escapees was the *Hinterlandmauer* (‘the back-land wall’), which closed off the border strip from the GDR side. Then the escapees had to climb over a signalling fence which, when touched, alerted the border soldiers



View of the staggered border system at Bernauer Straße in 1989. In the picture from the background to the front: buildings in East Berlin, Hinterland wall, signal fence with barbed wire, watchtower, patrol track, lighting line, ploughed control zone (to detect traces of people trying to escape), and border wall. Source: Stiftung Berliner Mauer, photo: Peter Trzeciok. Archive SBM F-04112

in such a way that the border guards posted there had a good view of the section of border between them. From there, they monitored the border strip and the hinterland of the border in order to spot fugitives at an early stage. At the same time, the border guards were to observe the area of West Berlin adjacent to the Wall.

At the end of the 1970s, the SED leadership had the previous border wall renovated. Increasingly anxious for international recognition, it wanted to avoid wartime-looking border barriers such as thorn mats, pillboxes and vehicle barriers marking the external image of the East German capital. Such barriers have been removed from the border strip since 1983. This was also possible because the new wall was much more 'lockable' and surveillance of both the border hinterland and the entire GDR had been improved: these border barriers were therefore less important. By the end of the 1980s, shortly before the fall of the Wall in 1989, some of the military in character border barriers had been removed from the Wall between East and West Berlin (for general information on the Building History see Klausmeier and

Schmidt 2004; Boeger, Cramer, Arera-Rütenik, Speiser, and van Tussenbroek 2009; also Schwochow 2021). However, most of the barriers remained, also obstacles were built up in the River Spree and other waters.

The Wall and barriers alone would not have been a sufficient obstacle for refugees. That is why armed soldiers guarded the Wall. They had orders to shoot at refugees if they could not prevent their escape in any other way. In the West, this was referred to as the “shoot-to-kill order” (*Schießbefehl*). The use of firearms at the GDR’s western borders was regulated by Grenztruppen internal instructions and orders, and only from 1982 by a law, the “GDR Border Law” (*Grenzgesetz der DDR*) (for the biographies and a detailed breakdown of the 140 fatalities at the Berlin Wall see *Die Todesopfer...* 2009, and the *Chronik der Mauer* website, section Victims at the Wall). Irrespective of the changing norms, an oral order had been in force since 1952, which made it mandatory for border police and border guards to shoot at fugitives, if they were unable to prevent an escape by other means.

Several hundred people lost their lives at the GDR’s entire border system as a consequence of the use of firearms by East-German border guards and of the armed, staggered border system. Between 1961 and 1989, 68 of the 140 fatalities at the Berlin Wall alone were fugitives shot by GDR border guards. A further 30 people died of accidents while or after trying to cross the border obstacles and three persons committed suicide after their failed escape attempts. In addition, 30 people from East and West who had no intention of fleeing died on this border: Among those are 15 escape helpers, seven deaths occurring after accidents in West-Berlin, like the five children who fell into the border waters while playing and were not rescued by the border troops, as well as eight GDR citizens who were shot in the border area, without having intentions of fleeing. One young Soviet soldier, who presumably had no fleeing intention as well, was mistakenly thought to be a deserter during a search operation near the border area and was shot. Eight GDR border soldiers were also killed by deserters, their comrades, a fugitive, an escape helper, and a West Berlin policeman. In addition, at least 251 travellers died during or after checks at Berlin border crossings (see *Die Todesopfer...* 2009, and the *Chronik der Mauer* website, section Victims at the Wall). The number of people who died out of grief and despair over the impact of the Wall on their lives is uncounted. People also died at the inner-German border between the Federal Republic of Germany and the GDR. To this day, however, there is no exact number of deaths



at the inner-German border. The current state of research and the sources available suggest that at least 260 victims can be assumed. An academic study by the Free University of Berlin has determined a number of 327 victims (*Die Todesopfer des DDR-Grenzregimes...* 2017). This study and the categorisation on which it is based are controversial. The Berlin Wall Foundation assumes a total of around 650 victims of the border regime as an approximate figure. This figure also includes the people who died in the Baltic Sea (proceedings of the Internal Workshop of the Berlin Wall Foundation and several other institutions on 29 May 2024; see also Sälter 2025).

'Window of Remembrance' at the Berlin Wall Memorial on Bernauer Strasse – a place of individual commemoration, presenting pictures and names of victims of the Berlin Wall. Source: Stiftung Berliner Mauer, photo: Babak Shomali

## The Fall of the Berlin Wall

At the CSCE conference in Helsinki in 1975, the SED had agreed in principle to the right to freedom of movement and freedom to travel without actually wanting to grant it. Since then, more and more GDR citizens applied to leave the country permanently for West Germany. In addition, an opposition movement formed in the GDR in the late 1970s, whose criticism of the political and social conditions became increasingly fundamental. Environmental destruction and economic stagnation also led to anger and disaffection with the SED state and with the dependence on the Soviet Union among the general population. Similar developments in other Eastern Bloc countries led to the founding of the independent trade union movement *Solidarność* in Poland, for example, which won state recognition

in November 1980, but was forcibly suppressed in December 1981 (for the general information and a vast bibliography on the fall of the Berlin Wall see *Revolution und Vereinigung...* 2009; Hertle 1996; Sarotte 2014).

After Mikhail Gorbachev became General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1985, the political situation in the entire Eastern Bloc slowly changed. He initially attempted to overcome the serious economic and social problems with domestic political reforms. In 1988, he abandoned the political principle of limited sovereignty of the Warsaw Pact states (the so-called Brezhnev Doctrine), which was decisive for Soviet foreign policy. This enabled the Eastern Bloc countries to determine their own national policies. The Hungarian rapprochement with the West led to the demonstrative dismantling of the border fence in Hungary on 2 May 1989 and the first hole in the Iron Curtain. The SED did not want to adopt the Soviet Union's reform programme for the GDR. However, the broad protest movement that formed among the East German population at the end of the 1980s and a growing escape movement put an end to the dictatorship in 1989. The SED was forced to make concessions, including the granting of freedom of travel. After the erroneous

The plaque in Tiergarten opposite to the Brandenburger Tor commemorating Ronald Reagan's speech of 12 June 1987. Photo Franciszek Dąbrowski, 2019





announcement of a new law on leaving the country, the Berlin Wall peacefully fell on 9 November 1989 under the onslaught of the masses. Its fall signalled the final demise of the GDR.

After the Wall was opened, it began to be torn down. So-called “Wall-peckers” (*Mauerspechte*) broke out their souvenirs. An ever-increasing number of new border crossings created numerous gaps in the Wall. Border guards dismantled the signal fence and other elements of the border obstacles. Both the GDR government and soldiers of the Border Troops began to think about commercialising the Wall. Parts of the Wall were sold all over the world (see *Die Berliner Mauer in der Welt* 2009). In June 1990, the systematic dismantling of the border fortifications began at the corner of Ackerstraße and Bernauer Straße between the districts of Wedding (West Berlin) and Mitte (formerly East Berlin) and was largely finished by the end of the year. However, some sections of the Wall were placed under monument protection by the East Berlin magistrate in 1990, including Bernauer Straße.

Excavators at the opening of the Berlin Wall on Bernauer Strasse in May 1990. Source: ELAB, Archiv der Versöhnungsgemeinde

## The Wall in Bernauer Straße

Bernauer Straße on the border between the Berlin districts of Wedding and Mitte was a focal point of post-war German history (see Nooke 2015; Sälter 2018). The construction of the Berlin Wall



View of Versöhnungskirche (Church of Reconciliation) in the border zone of 1980. It was closed for worship in 1961, and blown up by GDR authorities in 1985. The Chapel of Reconciliation at the Berlin Wall Memorial was built on its site. Source: Stiftung Berliner Mauer, donation of Hans-Joachim Grimm

and its consequences for the inhabitants of the divided city were experienced particularly dramatically here. The history of this street exemplifies the effects of the construction of the Wall: the destruction of urban space and ways of life, the separation of family members and friends. It documents the attempts to escape the dictatorship by fleeing to the West or to help people flee against its claim to power. The site shows the outstanding function of the Wall in the SED's power structure, how the Wall regime functioned in everyday life and reveals the deep discrepancy between the population and the GDR state leadership.

## The Divided Street

In Bernauer Straße, the border of the East Berlin territory ran along the front of the houses. Many residents of these border houses spontaneously decided to flee after the closure measures. They absented out of their flats or jumped into the jump sheets provided by the West Berlin fire brigade. Some were seriously injured, and the first fatalities of the border regime also occurred here. A few weeks after the Wall was built, the houses were evacuated by East German authorities, the remaining residents forcibly relocated and windows and doors bricked up. Bernauer Straße is also a place of remembrance for the peaceful overcoming of division. On the night of 10/11 November 1989, the first segments of the Wall were broken out between Bernauer Straße



Aerial view of Berlin Wall Memorial on Bernauer Strasse. Source: Stiftung Berliner Mauer, photo: Jürgen Hohmuth

and Eberswalder Straße to create a new crossing between East and West Berlin. The official demolition of the border obstacles also began in June 1990 at the corner of Bernauer Straße and Ackerstraße. Today, the Berlin Wall Memorial is located at this historic site.

## The Various Sites of the Berlin Wall Foundation

### Berlin Wall Memorial

The Berlin Wall Memorial is located on Bernauer Straße, as it was already well known during the Wall era due to numerous events and a long section of the border wall and many remnants of the border obstacles have been preserved here. The preservation of those objects is the result of the commitment of civil society and a decision by the East Berlin magistrate on 2 October 1990, the day before reunification: it placed the section of the border running across the Sophien cemetery under a preservation order.

A working group had already been formed in the spring of 1990 to develop a concept for the preservation of parts of the Berlin Wall in Bernauer Straße. The initiators were Peter Möbius (Museum of German History, *Museum für Deutsche Geschichte*), Helmut Trotnow (German Historical Museum, *Deutsches Historisches Museum*) and Pastor Manfred Fischer from the Protestant Church of Reconciliation. Shortly before the 29th anniversary of the building of the Wall, the initiators led by Manfred Fischer erected a plaque on the site on Bernauer Straße with the following inscription: “Attention! Attention! Dear Wall peckers, please do not ‘knock’ on this section of the Wall. .... Please help to preserve an authentic and dignified memorial for the victims of this border.” Manfred Fischer, who must be regarded

as the *spiritus rector* of the memorial and who lived directly next to the designated section of the Wall at the time, had negotiated with the Wall-peckers in countless discussions and, for the first time in July 1990, prevented demolition attempts by construction companies. In 1994, a competition was organised to design a memorial to the victims of the Wall and in memory of the division of the city. The memorial was inaugurated on 13 August 1998 (see Camphausen and Fischer 2014; Klausmeier 2009).

In the same year, on the initiative of the Berlin Senate, the *Verein Berliner Mauer* (Berlin Wall Association), which emerged from civic commitment around Manfred Fischer, was founded as the supporting association for a planned documentation centre. The aim was to complement the memorial with factual information and historical-political education. One year later, on the 10th anniversary of the fall of the Wall on 9 November 1999, the Documentation Centre was opened in the parish hall of the Versöhnungsgemeinde. In 2000, the Chapel of Reconciliation was solemnly inaugurated on the former border strip (Bahr 2008). These three elements make it possible to approach the history and consequences of the Berlin Wall in different ways and in different forms: artistically, documentarily and spiritually-religiously. Visitors can thus choose their own approach to the historical site and the evidence of the past.

The Berlin Wall Memorial extends along both sides of Bernauer Straße. The outdoor exhibition on the history of the Berlin Wall, exemplified by Bernauer Straße, can be seen on the border strip originally located in East Berlin. This includes the memorial to the divided city and the victims of communist tyranny as well as the Window of Remembrance. The area is also home to the Chapel of Reconciliation and the uncovered foundations of a former residential building whose façade formed the border wall until the early 1980s.

On the opposite side of the street, which once belonged to West Berlin, are the Visitor Centre and the Documentation Centre with an observation tower and a permanent exhibition on the history of the division of Berlin. The exhibition “Border and ghost stations in divided Berlin” is on display in the Nordbahnhof S-Bahn station. It documents the impact of the Wall on the city’s transport network.

Every year, the Berlin Wall Memorial on Bernauer Straße hosts the central commemorative events in memory of the construction of the Wall on 13 August 1961 and the fall of the Wall on 9 November 1989. The focus is on remembering the victims of the division and the courageous people who demonstrated for civil rights, freedom and



democracy in the autumn of 1989. Their protest led – in a favourable global political situation – to the Peaceful Revolution, which changed Germany, Europe and the world. We remember the 140 people who died at the Berlin Wall between 1961 and 1989 with regular memorial services in the Chapel of Reconciliation in the memorial area. The biography of one of the victims is read at each service. Those interested can attend the services – without prior registration – every Tuesday to Friday from 12 noon to 12.15 p.m. The services are arranged in cooperation with the Protestant Church of Reconciliation.

The Chapel of Reconciliation interior during a memorial service marking the 62nd anniversary of the construction of the Berlin Wall. Source: Stiftung Berliner Mauer, photo: Oana Popa-Costea

### Marienfelde Refugee Centre Memorial

The Marienfelde Refugee Centre Memorial is the central memorial of escapes in divided Germany (for more details see *Flüchtlingslager...* 2014; in particular Heidemeyer 2014; and Effner 2014). What makes it special? The museum is housed in an original building of the former emergency reception centre for refugees and resettlers from the GDR. It is therefore located in a historical site that is closely linked to the history of Germany's division and escape. At the same time, the museum is located in the immediate neighbourhood of a temporary home for refugees.

The history of the Marienfelde Refugee Centre shows how West German society dealt with immigration, defined political and legal criteria for admission and debated whether they were 'genuine' political refugees: Who is authorised to come there, who is allowed to get assistance and be part of the 'we' is currently the subject of



People in the courtyard of the Marienfelde refugee reception centre in the 1960s. Source: Stiftung Berliner Mauer, photo: Klaus Kindermann

intense debate once again. The use of the emergency reception centre also reflects political and social developments and upheavals. For example, the crisis in the GDR in 1953, which erupted in the popular uprising of 17 June, led to a sharp increase in the number of refugees. This observation raises questions about the reasons for escape or relocation. What political measures and social circumstances drove people from the GDR to leave? And what did they expect from West Germany? The debate centres on what the society in which people wanted to live should look like, what opportunities for development and participation they hoped for, where they felt they belonged and felt safe – a question that in turn points to the present. The memorial centre invites visitors to discuss this with exhibitions and a wide range of educational and mediation activities. It is also a place where you can get very close to people's personal stories and be touched by their experiences of setting out, overcoming borders and arriving.

The memorial site owes its existence to civic commitment: shortly after the end of the admission procedure in 1990, some employees of the former reception centre decided to secure its material legacy. Initially still under the supervision of the Berlin Senate Department for Social Affairs, a small exhibition opened in one of the former blocks of flats in August 1993. In the same year, those involved, together with former refugees, a number of historians and other interested parties, founded the Marienfelde Refugee Centre Memorial Association. The



Today the Marienfelde Refugee Centre Memorial is part of the Berlin Wall Foundation. Source: Stiftung Berliner Mauer, photo: Gesa Simons

association took over the organisation of the exhibition on a voluntary basis and was committed to documenting the history of the German-German refugee movement.

### East Side Gallery

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, only a few days passed before artists took the opportunity to paint on the east side of the Berlin Wall for the first time. However, GDR border guards immediately painted over the pictures on the segments at Potsdamer Platz. Shortly afterwards, David Monty, an artist from Schöneberg (West-Berlin), and Heike Stephan, an artist from Prenzlauer Berg (East-Berlin), presented their idea of turning the “Wall into the largest gallery in the world.” After several discussions with the Ministry of National Defence of the GDR, they finally agreed on the piece of wall in Mühlenstraße. The East Side Gallery project was officially commissioned by the GDR Council of Ministers and artists from all over the world were invited to take part. After both Heike Stephan and, some time later, David Monty were no longer involved in the project. Monty’s assistant at the time, Scottish born Christine MacLean, took over as project coordinator. From March 1990, she looked after the participants, acquired sponsorship money and developed advertising measures. She worked together with the event and advertising agency wuva. The East Side Gallery was opened on 28 September 1990. With their individual messages and commentaries, the artists created an artistic monument document that the desire for freedom is ultimately stronger than coercive measures and violence. With more than a hundred paintings, they expressed their joy at the fall of the Wall and the end of the Cold War, and gave expression to their hopes for a life in peace, freedom and democracy. However, many works of art also bear witness to their worries about



The East Side Gallery has become a tourist attraction and is popular place for selfies. Source: Stiftung Berliner Mauer, photo: Jascha Fibich, 2018.

an uncertain future (for more detailed information see von Arnim-Rosenthal and Haubold-Stolle 2022, in particular the chapter *Von der Berliner Mauer zur längsten Open-Air-Galerie der Welt*, pp. 13–41).

With their art, those involved in the East Side Gallery saved the Wall from being torn down, from further decay and from destruction. In November 1991, the East Side Gallery was entered in the list of monuments of the state of Berlin. The East Side Gallery is not only the most visible result of the opening of the Wall – as a result of the now almost complete demolition of the Berlin Wall, today it is also one of the few relics of the border obstacles that makes the 28-year division of the city perceptible in its original location.

The border obstacles had a special significance at this location. When the Wall was built on 13 August 1961, the Spree between the districts of Friedrichshain (East) and Kreuzberg (West) became a border strip. Its entire width belonged to East Berlin, while the Kreuzberg bank was already West Berlin territory. The East Side Gallery is therefore located on the former Hinterland wall that faced East Berlin. In addition to the topographical peculiarity, the border obstacles here also have a structural rarity: As a “protocol route” for high-ranking visitors to the GDR, the Hinterland wall on Mühlenstraße was visible to everyone. It was therefore constructed here as the well-known “Border Wall 75,” which elsewhere almost always faced West Berlin. The 3.6-metre-high sections of wall were intended to block the view of the death strip.

The historical traces on Mühlenstraße document the securing and constant expansion of the Berlin Wall into an insurmountable barrier.



View of the border strip in Mühlenstrasse, with the border wall 75' on the left; West Berlin began on the opposite bank in Kreuzberg. Source: Wikimedia Commons, photo: Gerd Danigel, 27 August 1990, CC BY 3.0

In order to create a clear “field of vision and fire” for GDR border soldiers, the shoreline buildings were successively demolished in the 1970s. The complete demolishment was finished in 1977, with only the mill warehouse of the formerly huge harbour area remaining. The GDR border obstacles completely destroyed the urban structure. One of the last remnants of the first generation of the Wall is a section of

Opening of the East Side Gallery on 28 september 1990.  
Source: Stiftung Berliner Mauer, photo: Günther Schaefer



the background wall made of the characteristic hollow blocks from 1961. This can be seen today at the East Side Gallery at the *Stralauer Platz* entrance. Other historical traces, such as a preserved lantern of the apron security system, can be found near the *Mühlenspeicher*. Immediately after 13 August 1961, people tried to flee across the Spree to the West Berlin bank. At least five people – Udo Düllick (5 October 1961), Werner Probst (14 October 1961), Anton Walzer (8 October 1962), an unknown fugitive (19 January 1965), and Manfred Weylandt (14 February 1972) – died in the border area of the river between *Oberbaumbrücke* and *Schillingbrücke*. They were shot by the GDR border guards or died under fire of hypothermia or exhaustion.

Dramatic scenes also occurred time and again on the *Kreuzberg* bank in cases when children fell into the water while playing. They lost their balance or slipped and were unable to get out of the water on their own. The West Berlin rescue services were not allowed to enter the Spree to save the children, while the GDR border guards did not intervene. By 1975, five children – Andreas Senk (13 September 1966), Cengaver Katranci (30 October 1972), Siegfried Kroboth (14 May 1973), Guiseppo Savoca (15 June 1974) and Cetin Mert (11 May 1975) – had drowned on *Kreuzberg's Gröbenufer* (now *May-Ayim-Ufer*) and near the destroyed *Brommy Bridge*. To prevent further accidents, the Berlin Senate had the passages to the embankment welded shut and a fence erected in front of the quay wall. In the spring of 1976, systems for drowning detection and prevention water accident detectors were also installed on the West Berlin bank (for individual biographies see *Die Todesopfer...* 2009; *Die Todesopfer des DDR-Grenzregimes...* 2017).

### Parliament of Trees

The *Parliament of Trees against War and Violence* is an approximately 2,850 m<sup>2</sup> memorial to those who died at the Berlin Wall and a memorial against war and violence in the centre of Berlin's government district. It was developed by nature and art activist Ben Wagin (1930–2021) immediately after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1990 and has been continuously designed and artistically developed ever since (see the Berlin Wall Foundation's website on the *Parliament of Trees*).

Ben Wagin created this once much larger open-air area with original wall elements on the former border strip in the year of reunification. The centrepiece of the memorial site is a square of 16 trees planted by the then prime ministers of the German old and new federal states. These are complemented by murals, wall art, elements of a sculpture



The Parliament of Trees against War and Violence. Source: Stiftung Berliner Mauer, photo: Jürgen Hohmuth

garden and performance art, memorial stones, flowerbeds, suggested burial plots, artistic interventions, pictures and texts. The names of a total of 258 victims of the GDR border regime are inscribed on granite slabs. The number is based on estimates and the state of knowledge at the time in 1990 when the memorial site was created. This figure does not correspond to the official number of at least 140 scholarly researched fatalities. As a reminder of peaceful coexistence, Wagin had already begun planting trees in West Berlin in 1979 wherever the Wall blocked the road. Some ginkgo trees, for example, can also be found in the Parliament of Trees as symbols of hope. Not only in this way, the traditional concept of a monument is being questioned here. In addition to focusing on the history of the Wall and division, the Parliament of Trees against War and Violence also commemorates the deaths of thousands of soldiers during the Second World War: Soviet soldiers stormed the Reichstag on 20 April 1945 and were shot on their way by a previously undetected SS unit. Since summer 2021, the Parliament of Trees has been looked after by the Berlin Wall Foundation.

### Günter Litfin Memorial

Günter Litfin was the first person shot at the Berlin Wall on 24 August 1961. He was born in Berlin on 19 January 1937 and lived in East Berlin. After completing an apprenticeship as a tailor, Günter found

a job in a West Berlin tailor workshop. At first the young man commuted daily to his job in West Berlin, but then he had found and rented himself an apartment in the West. He tried to escape only a few days after the sector-borders were closed and was shot on 24 August.

His younger brother, Jürgen, played an important role in the commemoration of Günter's fate. Jürgen Litfin (1940–2018), initially lived in East Berlin with his wife Brigitte and daughter Marion. After his application to leave the country was rejected in 1976, he spent ten months in prison in 1980 “for aiding and abetting attempted Republikflucht (escape from the republic),” which took a heavy toll on his health, ransom was paid for his release by the West German government for 95,897 DM. From 1981, he lived with his family in West Berlin, where he witnessed the fall of the Wall. The tragic circumstances of his brother's death never left him. The idea of keeping the memory of his brother Günter alive became the centre of his life. Jürgen Litfin initially campaigned for the renaming of a street in the former home of the Litfin family in Weißensee, which was renamed Günter-Litfin-Straße in 2000. In 2001, he took care of the restoration and re-laying of the memorial stone erected for his brother in 1962 at the Sandkrugbrücke bridge near the Humboldt harbour. Finally, he renovated the former border watchtower at Kieler Eck and opened a memorial with a small exhibition in 2003, which has remained unchanged to this day (only minor repairs were carried out in 2021). The exhibition shows documents about the border system,

Günter Litfin  
Memorial in the  
former watchtower  
in Kieler Eck. Günter  
Litfin was shot dead  
on 24 August 1961  
when he attempted  
to cross the border to  
West Berlin – a first  
victim of the Berlin  
Wall. Source: Stiftung  
Berliner Mauer,  
photo: Matthias  
Stange.



his brother's death, the victims of the Berlin Wall and his own efforts to keep Günter's memory alive. The Günter Litfin Memorial and the exhibition have been officially part of the Berlin Wall Foundation since 2017.

### Checkpoint Charlie

In October 1961, US and Soviet tanks stood here – in the centre of Berlin – facing each other menacingly. The conflict that led to the armed confrontation was triggered by the GDR's efforts to restrict the uncontrolled border crossing of the Western Allies. Ten weeks earlier, the GDR had created a border crossing at the corner of Friedrichstraße and Zimmerstraße when it sealed off the border in Berlin. The Friedrichstraße checkpoint was intended exclusively for the movement of Western Allied military personnel, diplomats and people from abroad. The Western Allies protested against this restriction on their freedom of movement, guaranteed to them by the city's four-power status. But in the end, the Western Allies accepted it, and set up a checkpoint on the West Berlin side. According to the NATO code, it was named Checkpoint Charlie after Checkpoint Alpha on the inner-German border and Checkpoint Bravo on the border between East Germany and West Berlin. Initially only the US occupying forces, but soon also the British and French occupying forces controlled border traffic and the protection of their rights. For example, GDR border police refused to allow members of the Western Allies in civilian clothes or cars to cross if they did not identify themselves. The USA then had such vehicles escorted by armed military police and eventually sent tanks to the checkpoint. At the same time, it held talks with the Soviet Union in the back-channel, which were initially fruitless. It was only when Soviet tanks arrived on 27 October and the tanks of the two superpowers faced each other ready for battle that an agreement was reached. After 16 hours of stand-off, the strategic and military trial of strength ended with the withdrawal of the tanks – first the Soviet tanks, then the US tanks (see Wilke 2011; Jarausch 2011).

On the East Berlin side, the GDR border crossing point and the border strip were constantly rebuilt and expanded. In the course of the 1960s, the GDR expanded the border crossing area. Control and clearance buildings were erected on the cleared ruins along Friedrichstraße. Barriers, massive concrete barriers and anti-tank barriers prevented easy passage. There were narrow passages on the

pavements for pedestrians. In the centre of Friedrichstraße, near Zimmerstraße, there was a little control tower, which was replaced by a higher one in the early 1970s. When tourist border traffic increased in the 1970s, a comprehensive remodelling of the entire border crossing point was planned, which was not completed until the 1980s. The area of the border crossing point was extensively asphalted and the additional lanes were built. This meant that border traffic was no longer only routed via Friedrichstraße, but also via the neighbouring property between Friedrichstraße and Mauerstraße. In the mid-1980s, the major extension took place with a further relocation of the lanes, new control towers and check-in buildings under a large hall construction. The Allied checkpoint also underwent structural changes over the decades. The wooden control hut was initially extended and then replaced by a metal container in the mid-1970s. However, it always remained an unfortified building in the middle of Friedrichstraße. In its provisional form, it was intended to symbolise the non-recognition of the division of the city.

The border crossing at the corner of Friedrichstraße and Zimmerstraße was a ‘hole in the wall’ in two respects. On the one hand, people from all over the world crossed the Wall here from West to East, bringing other worlds and views of life to East Berlin and the GDR. On the other hand, many people from the GDR managed to escape to the West here using forged passports, false uniforms and in converted vehicles, among other things. But people also died here trying to get over the Wall: in 1962, 18-year-old Peter Fechter bled to death at the Wall near the border crossing after being shot by border guards. Twelve years later, border soldiers shot 23-year-old Burkhard Niering at the border crossing: the conscript had taken a member of the passport control unit hostage in order to cross the border on foot (see *Die Todesopfer...* 2009; *Die Todesopfer des DDR-Grenzregimes...* 2017).

The Berlin Wall Foundation has been commissioned to develop a site of learning, education and remembrance at Checkpoint Charlie. However, legal challenges and matters of ownership, but above all, the challenges to secure a permanent budget for running the site, dominate discussions. At present, the foundation mainly offers digital programmes and temporary on-site exhibitions at this site.



## Educational Offers of the Berlin Wall Foundation

### Collection

The foundation collects original objects and historical artefacts relating to the Berlin Wall and the history of division. The collections include all forms of material cultural property, in particular objects, photographs, documents and publications. Original Wall remains from all over Berlin are preserved in the memorial's lapidarium. The thematic focus is on the GDR border regime, escape and escape assistance, protest and resistance against the division, dealing with and everyday life with the Wall, the Allied occupying powers in Berlin and the culture of remembrance of the divided city. The holdings are constantly expanding, mainly through private donations. The collections support academic research, educational work and help forming exhibitions, publications and online projects (see the Berlin Wall Foundation website, section Themen/Digitale Angebote).

The collections, the research and press archive as well as the reference holdings of the Berlin Wall Foundation are continuously digitised and recorded in a database. The better part of it is online (see the Berlin Wall Foundation website, section Themen/Digitale Angebote). They are available to all interested parties for inspection and use. Due to provisions of archive law, copyright law, privacy protection or individual agreements with donors, certain holdings are excluded or only accessible to a limited extent.

Checkpoint Charlie on Friedrichstrasse. View from the former American Sector to the former Soviet Sector. Source: Stiftung Berliner Mauer, photo: Gesa Simons

## Oral History Archive

We see working with contemporary witnesses as a way of making everyday life with the Berlin Wall and the division of Germany visible and comprehensible, and see ourselves as part of oral history. It is also about giving victims and their relatives a voice. In our archive, the memories of contemporary witnesses are collected, preserved and made accessible to the public. Many eyewitnesses talk about their experiences at seminars and workshops and are actively involved in our educational programmes. We conduct biographical interviews with contemporary witnesses of history whose personal experiences are linked to various historical topics relating to the Berlin Wall and the division of Germany. The focal points are differentiated according to our sites. The sub-collection of the Berlin Wall Memorial contains interviews that reflect experiences of escape and escape assistance, everyday life in East and West Berlin and the experience of the transformation period. The Marienfelde Refugee Centre Memorial also focuses on the experiences of escape, emigration and (late) resettlement, as well as the time after arrival at the reception centre. Life history interviews provide space for the entire biography of the interviewee.

We collect the accounts, concerning the topics of the Berlin Wall, internal German division and escape movements in the context of the Cold War up to the 1990s. We are interested not (only) in spectacular events and experiences, but also in everyday experiences that are otherwise not depicted. Our extensive archive is based on around 500 interviews with contemporary witnesses of history. They provide an everyday historical approach to the topics covered by the Berlin Wall Foundation. The audio-visual material is supplemented by individual recordings and interviews with contemporary witnesses of history. Journalists, researchers, students, school pupils and other interested parties use our archives for research purposes by prior appointment.

## Education and Interpretation

The Foundation's historical sites and collections enable us to constantly understand and negotiate political, social and cultural developments anew. The places and traces help us to understand complex histories and to reflect on them in the context of current values. They make it possible to consider the heritage of the past in a way that is relevant

to the present and the future. In our educational work, we focus on the active comprehension of history by the participants. We want to initiate sustainable learning processes, awaken enthusiasm for historical knowledge and at the same time critically scrutinise the past. Our understanding of history is multi-perspective and thus takes into account different viewpoints, perspectives and experiences. We develop innovative approaches that challenge not only rational skills but also creativity, imagination and empathy. The Berlin Wall Foundation offers guided tours, seminars and workshops to a great variety of different target groups.

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### Locations of Berlin Wall Foundation's sites

Berlin Wall Memorial  
 Bernauer Straße 111 (Documentation Centre) + 119 (Visitor Centre)  
 13355 Berlin

Marienfelde Refugee Centre Memorial  
 Marienfelder Allee 66/80  
 12277 Berlin

East Side Gallery  
 Mühlenstraße 47-80  
 10243 Berlin

Günter Litfin Memorial  
 Kieler Straße 2  
 10155 Berlin

Checkpoint Charlie  
Friedrichstraße / Zimmerstraße  
10969 Berlin

Parliament of Trees against War and Violence  
Schiffbauerdamm  
10117 Berlin

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East Side Gallery. Credits: Berlin Wall Foundation,  
Photo: Mathias Stange

