



13.08.1961

13 August: Building of the Berlin Wall

In 1961, the GDR continues to fight against problems at all levels. Qualified skilled workers and academics are moving to the West, where living and working conditions are clearly better. Censorship of the press, enforced social conformity, forced collectivisation of agriculture, political repression, and constant bullying from the Soviet Union have all combined to alienate many GDR citizens completely from their country. The GDR's economic situation is difficult, to say the least. Shortfalls in supply make day to day life increasingly difficult. Add to this, the practical reality of approximately 50,000 East Berlin citizens who quite legally have regular employment in the Western part of the city, and so can afford to buy luxury items with their salary in the 'hard currency' of the D-Mark, items that are beyond the reach of other GDR citizens. A cold realisation of the fact that, even under Socialism, some seem to be able to afford more than others, leads to jealousy and triggers increasing social tensions. The GDR leadership needs to stop the 'brain drain' of people leaving the country as a matter of urgency, if the state is not to become completely paralysed in the very near future.



Against this background, the Chairman of the State Council of the German Democratic Republic, Walter Ulbricht, assigns the 49-year old Security Secretary of the Central Committee of the SED, Erich Honecker, with a task that is to be kept strictly secret. By building a wall between the West and East sectors of Berlin, and subsequently implementing a corresponding reduction of sector-crossings, the GDR citizens' Abstimmung mit den Füßen (voting with their feet) would be prevented overnight. The inner-German border is also to be fortified and rigorously safeguarded. Honecker cautiously and prudently prepares the difficult mission. Nonetheless, rumours abound about the GDR leadership's plans. Shortly before the construction of the wall, Ulbricht baldly lies, 'Niemand hat die Absicht, eine Mauer zu errichten' ('Nobody has the intention to erect a wall') at a press conference before the global public and his own citizens. Barely two months later, however, the Soviet sector of Berlin is separated from Western sectors by the overnight construction of a wall. During the night of 12t into 13t August, approximately 15,000 men, border troops, and members of the Barracked People's Police (KVP) and 'operation brigade' groups cordon off streets and rail or tram tracks into the Western part of the city. In a joint action with soldiers from the National People's Army (NVA) and the Soviet Army, the backwards facing line behind the border of the sector is controlled and secured. Using barbed wire and 'cheval de frise' defensive barricades, the sector's borders are completely blocked.



The local public transport system is suspended. Over the following days, the building workers begin with the construction of separation walls on the border. House windows are bricked up in Bernauer Street, where the footpaths officially belong to the western sector but the buildings belong to the East. In this self-same Bernauer Street, the first death comes as a result of the building of the Berlin Wall, when 58-year old Ida Siekmann jumps from the third story of 48 Bernauer Street, but suffers such serious injuries that she dies on the way to hospital.



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Over the following years, the Antifaschistische Schutzwall (Antifascist Protection Wall), a typically technocratic term the GDR coins for the Berlin Wall while at the same time ridiculing the actual facts, is strengthened and reinforced with sentry guards and automatic guns, making it an insurmountable obstacle. From 1961 to 1989, the year of the fall of the Wall, there are 138 deaths along the border in Berlin. On the 1,400 km long inner-German border, dividing the GDR and the Federal Republic of Germany, it is estimated at least 500 more people lose their lives from 13 August 1961 through to 1989. As with the Berlin Wall, the border guards' Schießbefehl (order to shoot) is a stark reality along the inner-German border, which is also comprehensively secured. Any individual who does not abort their attempt to escape when challenged is simply shot by the border guards.

Following the end of the GDR regime, numerous former officials and border guards from the defunct Arbeiter- und Bauernstaates (workers' and farmers' state) are required to account for the carrying out of the order to shoot before German courts.

For 28 years the Berlin Wall is the most conspicuous symbol of the division of Germany, of the Cold War, but also, indirectly, for German guilt from the Nazi era. Without the German war of aggression, there would never have been a division of Germany, and there would never have been a Mauer (Wall).

**T**ranslated into English by Heather Rae, proofread by Maria-Philippa Wieckowski

  
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