

The Berlin Wall

Gilbert Pleuger visited an icon of the era of 'Cold War'



ALTHOUGH THE BERLIN WALL could not be seen from space, unlike the Great Wall of China, it was as important as a symbol in the post-Second World War period. My first revisit, after 1943, was in 1984 and included an obligatory call at Checkpoint Charlie and an underground journey through East Berlin and its grim, dirty-grey deserted stations that seemed to be taken from the set of *The Third Man*. Without the benefit of hindsight, I did not realise that my visit was during the last stage of the Cold War that started with the USSR invasion of Afghanistan on Christmas Day 1979.

Berlin was a key point of tension between the victors over Nazi Germany. While those powers had made a peace treaty with Austria in 1955, the peace treaty with Germany has, even now, still to be agreed. All that was put in place were agreements for the occupation of Germany by Britain, the USA, France (the area that became the Federal Republic of Germany, FDR, in May 1949) and the USSR (German Democratic Republic, GDR, in October 1949). Berlin, located deep in the East within the USSR zone and joined to the West by rail, road and air corridors, had a similar division. My visit by car passed miles of featureless collective farms on the North German plain in East Germany. The former German capital had survived, but only just, the Berlin blockade, 1948-9, when the Soviets severed road and rail links, a survival made possible by the Berlin airlift. Between 1949-61 some 2.5 million Germans 'escaped' from East Germany

to West Berlin and the FDR, no less than 160,000 in the months January to August 1961: many were skilled workmen and their departure impoverished the society they left. In 1957 it became an offence to leave without permission. Then, in August 1961, the closure of the borders between East and West Berlin was ordered and, thereby, 60,000 East Berlin commuters who worked in the West were trapped. Starting with barbed wire and the support of tanks, step by step an elaborate Wall was constructed. Houses immediately on the border were forcibly evacuated prior to their demolition. Eventually there were as many as 12 parallel sections to the 'Wall' including an anti-vehicle trench, a control track, a column track, backland wall and

signal fence, wire mesh fencing as well as watchtowers, bunkers and the 120 cms wide, 360 cms high, wall that extended 43 km between West/East Berlin. This Wall, itself, was rebuilt four times between 1961 and 1990, the fourth and ultimate being constructed in 1975.

After Gorbachev became leader of the USSR in 1985, the *perestroika* (economic reform) in 1987 and *glasnost* (openness) policies were introduced and following changes in Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia and unrest in East Germany, in November 1989 the Wall was opened for 'private trips abroad'. The next day new crossing points were made but, within days, private individuals from East and West began the demolition of the Wall themselves. The division of Berlin and Germany ended in July 1990 when an economic, monetary and social union between East and West Germany was formed and Berlin was nominated the capital. It was not for some years, and a great deal of construction, that the government ministries were moved there. In the meantime, Berlin became the largest building site in Europe, the scene for the perennial comedy series that make parents, if not students, chuckle, *Auf Weidersehn Pet*, and a must for the party-going European backpacker.

On my next visit, in 1992, almost all the Wall had been removed. Some was retained as a memorial to an era and to the people, around 200 injured and 192 killed, who were caught when trying to reach West Berlin.



Illustrations: The Wall during the Cold War, top; a section of the Wall retained as a memorial, below

Illustration acknowledgements, Volume 11, Number 2, December 2005

Courtesy of Dr D. Williamson, page 11 top and bottom right; *Illustrated London News*; pages 11 top and middle left, 18, 19, 24 bottom; Courtesy of Dr J. Pollard cover right, pages 24 top and 26; Courtesy of Susan Barton, page 36; National Portrait Gallery, London, pages 2 and 18; Sempringham Archive, front cover left, pages 1, 3, 6, 9, 19 right, 20, 32, 34 and 35.

SUBSCRIPTIONS: Ann Eddington. EDITORIAL OFFICE: John Plummer and Sue Calvert
INTERNET DEVELOPMENT CONSULTANT: Philip Buddery, www.oceanicdesign.com
PRINTING SERVICES: Tavistock Press, Manton Lane, Bedford MK41 7PG

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