

EDITORIAL

THE BERLIN WALL

Michael Cramer

Member of the German Green Party in the Berlin City-State Parliament (1989-2004) and in the European Parliament (2004-2019).

He is the initiator of the “Berlin Wall Trail”, the “Iron Curtain Trail” and the author of these books.

michacramer@t-online.de

This year, we remember the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Wall in Berlin and of the Iron Curtain in Europe. “Where was the Wall?” is a question that many visitors of Berlin still ask today. Many teenagers know about the years before 1989 only from their history books. Today, the former course of the 40-kilometre inner-city border is marked by a double row of cobblestones, with metal plaques at regular intervals on the West Berlin side, bearing the words “Berliner Mauer 1961-1989”.

The Wall around West Berlin was 3.60 m high and 160 km long. Its appearance and location changed over the course of time. The barbed-wire fencing was replaced by pre-manufactured Wall segments, which were in some parts reinforced with metal grid fences. Between the “outer border wall” facing West and the “inner border wall” facing East was the brightly lit notorious “death strip” with the “patrol path”, on which GDR border troops guarded the frontier. On the GDR-side, only selected people were allowed to live in the neighbourhoods directly behind the Wall. Their friends and relatives had to be registered before any visits and needed to obtain a special permit. More than 300 guard towers, 30 headquarters, 20 bunkers, floodlight systems, signal and alarm fences, as well as dog running areas and tank traps were installed to prevent people from escaping to West Berlin.

Before the construction of the Wall, about four million people successfully escaped the GDR. Afterwards, people from the East continuously tried to cross the barricades. 128 people lost their lives at the Berlin Wall. From the 80 responsible marksmen who were identified after the end of the GDR and brought before a court, 77 received a suspended sentence.

On 24 August 1961, 24-year-old Günter Litfin was shot when he attempted to swim to the western side of the Humboldthafen. A monumental plaque is dedicated to this first victim after the construction of the Wall. The final fugitive to be shot dead at the Berlin Wall was 20-year-old Chris Gueffroy, who was killed on 5 February 1989 in a hail of bullets as he attempted to swim across the Britzer canal to Neukölln.

Immediately after the fall of the Wall, many environmental and transport initiatives started with the aim of developing the Wall strip as a bicycle round tour. In order to win support for their initiative, they put up bike pictograms in many places along the Eastern patrol path. Today it is possible to cycle along the entire length of the former border.

The “Berlin Wall Trail” is an exciting route, full of history. It takes cyclists past many important and famous landmarks. There are also many names that serve as a reminder of past events: Checkpoint Charlie, Potsdamer Platz, Invalidenfriedhof or Bernauer Straße. The route also passes the “Bösebrücke” in Bornholmer Straße, which became famous on 9th November 1989 when the first people crossing the border were greeted with cheers and sparkling wine. The legendary “Oberbaumbrücke”, the “East Side Gallery” or the remaining Wall segments in Niederkirchnerstraße are also worth a visit. Another interesting site is the “Parliament of Trees against War and Violence” by the artist Ben Wagin, whose work was integrated into the new buildings of the Bundestag on the Eastern bank of the river Spree shortly after the fall of the Wall.

The fall of the Wall in 1989 sparked a heated debate over what to do with the remnants. Most Berliners wanted to erase all evidence of the Wall and this terrible time as quickly as possible. Only a small

minority thought “beyond the day” (Willy Brandt) and fought to preserve authentic parts of the Wall and the border strip. They were mostly individuals, representatives of monument protection organisations and citizens’ initiatives who prevented this important part of history being forgotten.

In March 1996, a competition entitled “Crossings” was launched to generate proposals for monuments at the former border crossing points, of which there were seven in 1961. Additionally, the project “Geschichtsmeile Berliner Mauer” (Berlin Wall History Mile) was established. It is a permanent exhibition in four languages (German, English, French and Russian), which consists of 30 plaques that provide information about the history of the division of the city, as well as the construction and fall of the Wall. The plaques contain photos and short texts to describe events that occurred at specific locations along the Wall.

The “Berlin Wall History Mile” continues on the outskirts of the Wall Trail with information boards. Historical photos and texts in German and English direct the attention of passers-by to certain places, which, due to their former usage, specific development or other special events, highlight in some way the different aspects of the city’s former division. The steles - just like the signs “Berlin Wall Trail” - are 3.60 m tall, just like the Wall once was. Apart from the information boards, there are also steles and commemorative crosses for the killed fugitives in order to remind the public of their fates.

People talking about the Berlin Wall usually refer to the inner-city border strip between East and West Berlin. The Berlin Wall is, in fact, much longer, as it also includes the 120-kilometre long border between West Berlin and the surrounding Land Brandenburg, which can also be explored by bike. Far away from the hustle and bustle of the big city, this stretch winds through pleasant countryside and woods. For example, it takes cyclists past curiosities like the “Eiskeller” (ice cellar) in Spandau, an enclave which was surrounded by the Wall on three sides, as well as the border crossing at Staaken. Of particular historical interest is the

Glienicker Bridge, where Americans and Soviets once exchanged their spies. Of course, one must also not miss the biggest border crossing complex in Dreilinden (at the motorway crossing), which is now protected as a historic site.

Thanks to the positive media response, the Berlin Senate decided, on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the construction of the Wall, to put all its remnants under monument protection and to develop the entire length of the route in a signposted and bicycle-friendly way. It is an attractive combination of history workshop and bicycle tourism, of recreation and culture. The inner-city section between Bernauer Straße and the Oberbaumbrücke is especially very informative and historically interesting, making it not just an ideal spot for cycling but also for a historical and political walk.

The “Berlin Wall Trail” has become part of Berlin’s Tourism Programme and is the first project that connects city tourism with soft tourism. It has developed into a tourist highlight in the last years. Today, even some five-star hotels advertise the route and offer bikes and guides to their guests. In Berlin, it is possible to experience history by bike during the day and then enjoy the reunited city in the evening in concerts, the opera or in one of the many theatres.

But not just Berlin, but Germany as a whole was divided into East and West by a 1,400 km long death strip with 3,000 km of fences, vehicle traps, 830 watchtowers, floodlight systems, walls and bunker complexes. To keep the memory of the former border strip alive it is necessary to develop it for soft tourism. Additionally, it was intended to protect the flora and fauna through the establishment of a European Green Belt in the former death strip. In December 2004, the German Bundestag voted unanimously in favour of this. It was initiated by the Foundation for Environmental and Natural Protection in Germany (BUND), aiming at changing the death strip into a living space for around 5,000 different animal and plant species. It has today 150 nature reserves, numerous flora-fauna-habitat areas (FFH) and biosphere reserves.

But not only Berlin and Germany; Europe also was divided for

decades: the “Iron Curtain” ran from the Barents Sea at the Norwegian-Russian border down to the Black Sea at the Turkish-Bulgarian border. Today, it does not divide us anymore. It is a symbol of a common past in reunited Europe. This is another reason why, in the autumn of 2005, a big majority in the European Parliament from all the countries and all the groups voted in favour of the motion that I initiated to include the “Iron Curtain Trail” in its report concerning “New perspectives and new challenges for sustainable European tourism”. It is also intended to help build and strengthen a common European identity. The trail includes countless monuments, museums and open-air facilities, which remind visitors of the division of Europe and how it was overcome by the Peaceful Revolutions in East and Central Europe. 20 countries are part of this project, 15 of which are today member states of the EU.

The route runs along the Western border of the former Warsaw-Pact states. It touches the Norwegian-Russian and the Finnish-Russian border and then passes the coastlines of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Kaliningrad, Poland and the former GDR. The path then leads from the peninsula Priwall at Travemünde until the state-triangle between Saxony, Bavaria and the Czech Republic and follows *en route* the former inner-German border strip. It then leads over the elevations of the Bohemian Forest, past Mähren and the Slovakian capital Bratislava, where it passes the Danube river. After the Austrian-Hungarian border, the trail continues through Slovenia and Croatia. Between Romania and Serbia, the route mostly follows the course of the Danube, to then finally end at the Bulgarian Black Sea coast at the Northern tip of Turkey, after having crossed Bulgaria, North Macedonia and Greece.

Under the slogan “Unbuilding Wall”, the “Iron Curtain Trail” and the “Berlin Wall Trail” in 2018 have been part on the Biennale in Venice. In 2019, the “Iron Curtain Trail” was certified by the Council of Europe as a “Cultural Route”.