

THE COLD WAR AS A VISUAL CONFLICT:
PHOTOGRAPHIC REPRESENTATIONS OF THE BERLIN WALL

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Abstract. This article deals with the iconology of the Berlin Wall from its construction, in August 1961, to its fall, in November 1989. The Berlin Wall was the symbol of the Cold War. It was the most photographed and filmed motif of that period. In this regard, the West and the East gave each other a battle of images: some of them became world-famous. They included photographs that proclaimed the Wall to be an “antifascist rampart” on one side and a “Wall of Shame” on the other side. These photographs formed binary couples: freedom *vs.* peace, concrete and barbed wire *vs.* human flesh, victims *vs.* martyrs.

Keywords: Berlin Wall, Cold War, GDR, iconography, propaganda, memorials

The German philosopher Walter Benjamin considered that “history is broken down into images”¹. History produces pictures – paintings, and more recently, photos, and the pictures in turn influence history, influence our collective historical memory². Pictures of the past determine our image of the past. Some pictures have the power to crystallize interpretations of an event in our head, to shape its perception and to fix it in the collective memory. During the 20th century, the city of Berlin was extremely iconogenic: photos captured the enthusiasm at the outbreak of war in 1914 and, thereafter, the proclamation of the Republic and the Spartakist uprising 1919, the hyperinflation of 1923 where people carted

around wheelbarrows full of banknotes, later SA troops marching through the Brandenburg Gate, the burning Reichstag 1933, the Russian flag being planted at the top of the Parliament in 1945, haggard refugees among the ruins, the Dakotas of the Airlift of 1948-49, demonstrators throwing stones at Soviet tanks in 1953, Benno Ohnesorg killed by a policeman 1967 when students protested against the visit of the Iranian Shah, squatters of Kreuzberg in the 1980s, Ronald Reagan's appeal to "Mr Gorbachev" in 1987 to "bring down this wall" and above all the Wall itself.

Berlin was at the heart of the Cold War in Europe. The divided city was the cause of two major crises, the Soviet Blockade in 1948-49 and the Wall crisis in 1961³. This was where the two superpowers learnt not to go too far, learnt to minimize the risk of a major conflict, learnt to prevent a fatal escalation that could have led to a nuclear war.

For the East, building the Wall was the less dangerous solution to the emigration problem because it achieved the main goal of interrupting the exodus without challenging the occupation rights of the Western powers in West Berlin. Between the creation of the GDR (or the German Democratic Republic, German abbreviation DDR) in October 1949 and the building of the Wall in August 1961, 2.7 million people fled the GDR, most of them taking the exit provided by West Berlin. The two halves of the city were fully joined until August 1961. The refugees who fled the GDR were above all young people whose education had been financed by the State, engineers, skilled workers, teachers, managers, medical staff, etc. This meant a huge loss for the East German economy and society⁴. For the communist regime, it was an existential necessity to check the flow of fugitives, to block the escape route of West Berlin. Moreover, this exodus of population greatly damaged the GDR's international reputation and destroyed its claim to have realized the "actually existing socialism"⁵.

For the West, the Wall confirmed its propaganda regarding the totalitarian nature of the Communist system, but it did not

undermine the viability and sustainability of West Berlin. Both sides were, in fact, relieved when the Wall went up. As US President John F. Kennedy put it: “It’s not a nice solution, but a wall is a hell of a lot better than a war”⁶.

The Berlin Wall was and still is the iconic symbol of the Cold War, although it was built well over a decade after its beginning⁷. First, it marked the visual reality of the East-West conflict. It embodied in brutal concrete and barbed wire the metaphorical “Iron Curtain” described by Churchill in 1946. It ended up symbolizing the Communist system itself. Secondly, it became so popular because, for the first time in history, a wall divided a city down the middle, not just separating off a small part of it as in a ghetto, Beijing’s secret city or the Vatican. It was the most photographed and filmed motif of that period. Henceforth, everything was duplicated if not triplicated: town halls, universities, operas, theatres, picture galleries, transport networks, airports, etc. Thirdly, the Wall appeared to be the ultimate inhumane construction as it imprisoned a whole population, depriving the East Germans of their basic freedom of movement: some would risk their life to regain it, even if that meant never returning to their families in East Germany.

The Berlin Wall, the supreme symbol of the Cold War, was the sensational media event of its time. From its construction, in August 1961, to its fall, in November 1989, the Wall was the focus of lavish photographic attention⁸. Yet here as with other major episodes of the twentieth century (such as the Spanish Civil War, or the end of the Second World War, or the Vietnam War), the same few pictures are always used by the media. This limited selection is explained by the particular emotions transported by these photos and their emblematic value, which rooted them in our collective memory⁹.

THE FIRST PAIR

1.1. The Bernauer Strasse: Focus of Media Attention

On 15th August 1961, two days after the inter-sector borders of Berlin were closed by East German security forces, the young East-German NCO Conrad Schumann decided to desert and flee from East Berlin to the West, as the separating structures were still incomplete in some places such as the Bernauer Strasse,



Late August 1961. East German guard Conrad Schumann jumps to freedom in West Berlin. From the booklet “A City Torn Apart: Building of the Berlin Wall”. For more information, visit CIA's Historical Collections webpage.

where barbed wire had been used at ground level to create a temporary barrier. Located in the French Sector, this street became famous as it lays right on the border between the two Berlins: the houses on the Street belonged to the East but the pavement belonged to the West, which caused dramatic scenes such as inhabitants jumping from windows or from the roofs of houses onto tarpaulins held by firefighters. Journalists were drawn to this curious street. Thus it was that the young newspaper intern Peter Leibing from Hamburg with his camera managed to capture the very moment when Conrad Schumann leapt across the barbed wire, casting aside his Russian gun, a gesture that looked like a refusal to take part in the Eastern military operation. Published the very next day on the front cover on the West German popular daily newspaper *Bild*, the picture was adopted by the press everywhere in

the world, voted the best photo of the year under the title “Leap into Freedom”.

The photo of the Bernauer Strasse made history. For the West, it symbolized the irrepressible desire for individual liberty and the condemnation of communist dictatorships that imprisoned the population. This image became the media icon of the Wall, even if, paradoxically, the Wall itself was not captured in the shot. The picture is still being reproduced over and over on posters, postcards, stamps, T-shirts, mugs and other souvenirs.

In the East, the picture was of course suppressed. The communist regime could obviously not let people believe that their guards were deserting their posts to flee to the enemy and that the border was not airtight. So in reaction, a week after Schumann’s flight, the head of the GDR, Walter Ulbricht, ordered, all fugitives to be stopped and arrested by all means, including, if necessary, the use of firearms. The first fugitive was killed on 24 August¹⁰.

1.2. Living Rampart

The GDR’s leadership did not want to lose the battle of images for public opinion. They promoted another picture, the photograph of four defiant militiamen standing in front of the Brandenburg Gate. This photo was shot on 14 August 1961 by the photographer Peter



From the booklet “A City Torn Apart: Building of the Berlin Wall”. For more information, visit the CIA’s Historical Collections.

Heinz Jung who worked for the official press agency of the GDR. But the photo was not published until a couple of weeks later, in order to counterbalance the colossal global impact of the “Leap into Freedom”.

The four East German militiamen in front of the Brandenburg Gate on the 14th August, 1961:

<https://www.bild.bundesarchiv.de/dba/de/search/?query=Bild+183-1987-0704-057: Bild 183-85458-0001>

The picture of the four militiamen was used to create a Socialist icon of the building of the Wall. It was spread so widely and popularized so effectively throughout the Eastern Bloc that many historians mistakenly believed it to have been the only photo of this event that circulated in the East. There were others, although they did not reach the same fame as this one in the GDR. The main organ of the East German Communist Party, *Neues Deutschland*, published this photo six times in 25 years. It also featured on a stamp celebrating the 20th birthday of the “fighting units of the working class”, with a close-up of the four militiamen.

These “fighting units” belong to a paramilitary force of 210 000 who supported the army and the police. They were civilians equipped with guns and kaki clothes. In August 1961, their mission consisted of ensuring the security of the inter-sector borderline¹¹.

The photo of these four militiamen holds a clear message: the completion of the border is a popular and purely *defensive* measure – in tune with the claim that the Wall had to be erected to protect East Germany against an invasion from West Germany and the other NATO powers. The photo incarnates the justification given by the regime for the erection of the Wall: it was presented as an “anti-fascist rampart”, that at once guarantees peace and protects “the State of workers and peasants” from an alleged Western plan to attack and invade the GDR¹².

By drawing on working-class militiamen, the GDR tried to demonstrate that this mission had the support of the people, even suggesting that it originated with the people. This is why the GDR

gave such prominence to this picture of a foursome which, in turn, corresponds to East-German ideology where the community is more important than the individual. The picture underlines that these paramilitary men create a united front, a human wall, or a “living rampart” as *Neues Deutschland* put it¹³. Photographed slightly from below, at an angle elevating and almost glorifying them, the four men seem resolute, looking sternly at something outside of the frame, tightly clutching their guns; but they do not seem menacing nor bellicose. They exude both determination and serenity, aware of the gravity of their duties. In direct contrast to the deserter Schumann, these soldiers do their duty, defending their country. These two images form an immediate dialectic: one shows the fleeing soldier pursuing his individual liberty, whilst the other shows the community embodied by the militiamen who stand firm on the front line between East and West. They are there to protect Berlin, symbolized by the Brandenburg Gate, against “imperialist aggression”.

The four soldiers are also perfectly identifiable and they were known to be party members. The East German propaganda would use not only this image but also summon the four men regularly to be shown off at public events for propaganda purposes. Thus, in July 1987, on the occasion of the 750th anniversary of Berlin, a massive parade would be organized in East Berlin to illustrate the history of the city with 300 floats with living images. One depicted the closing of the border: adopting the same posture as 26 years ago, the very same four men posed in front of a little white wall with a Brandenburg Gate of cardboard.

For the 750 years of Berlin, the four militiamen act out the closing of the border, 4th July 1987:

[https://www.bild.bundesarchiv.de/dba/de/search/?query=Bild+ 183-1987-0704-057: Bild 183-1987-0704-057](https://www.bild.bundesarchiv.de/dba/de/search/?query=Bild+183-1987-0704-057: Bild 183-1987-0704-057)

Yet West Berlin had anticipated this. A month earlier, West Berlin also celebrated this anniversary. The mayor invited US President, Ronald Reagan, who asked Conrad Schumann, the young NCO

who had attained world fame with his famous leap of 1961, to sit next to him on the grandstand.

During the 28 years of its existence, the visit of the “Wall of Shame”, as it was called on the Western side, and of the “anti-fascist rampart”, as it was known in the GDR, formed part of all visits of foreign officials or delegations and was greatly exploited by the propaganda apparatus. For example, in 1963, US President John F. Kennedy travelled to West Berlin, where he pronounced his famous words “Ich bin ein Berliner”, after walking along the Wall at the Brandenburg Gate. But five months earlier, his Soviet counterpart, Nikita Khrushchev, had already inspected the Wall, congratulating the GDR leader Walter Ulbricht for taking back control of the Berlin frontier¹⁴.

PAIR NUMBER TWO

2.1. The GDR as a Big Concentration Camp

The iconographic competition between East and West also concerned itself with the victims of the Wall. Here, too, the West eventually won. Even though he was not the first victim of the Wall¹⁵, the tragic death of Peter Fechter caused such a shock in public opinion that it even acquired an allegorical dimension.

The dead body of Peter Fechter, at the bottom of the Wall (17th August 1962):

http://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=611

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Body_of_Peter_Fechter_lying_next_to_Berlin_Wall.jpg.

This 18-year old bricklayer apprentice was shot on 17 August 1962 as he tried to climb the Wall close to Checkpoint Charlie, the most famous border control point between the two halves of Berlin. Hearing two gun-shots, the West German journalist Wolfgang Bera of the *Bild* newspaper (the offices of which were located only a hundred yards away) rushed to the scene of action, climbed the Wall

on the Western side and saw the body of Peter Fechter lying on the ground at its foot on the Eastern side. Badly hurt, the fugitive lays agonizing in the no man's land for nearly an hour, with no-one daring to help him. With many people congregated on the Western side and hearing him call out for help and groan, Fechter eventually died in great pain. Eventually, some East German guards came to carry him away, whilst hundreds of angry Berliners, grouped on the Western side, shouted "murderers!"¹⁶.

With his Leica M2, Wolfgang Bera also captured the moment when the body of Fechter was taken away by the guards. The photograph evokes Christian iconography, the descent of the body of Christ from the cross. It was published immediately on the front page of the big daily paper *Berliner Morgenpost*, to be quickly republished by the world press including the American magazines *Time* and *Life*.

Peter Fechter being carried off by East German guards:

<https://iconicphotos.wordpress.com/2009/05/10/peter-fetcher/>

This image gave great symbolism to Fechter's fate; not only does he represent all the victims of the Wall, past and future, but the image also denounced the barbarism of the East German State, prepared to kill its own citizens. From then onwards, the GDR would be compared to an extended concentration camp surrounded by barbed wire and watched by armed guards, which establishes an exaggerated correlation between the Nazi dictatorship and the communist dictatorship¹⁷. The image also illustrates the East Germans' desire for freedom at all costs. Close to the spot where Peter Fechter fell, a cross would soon be erected, later to be replaced by a stele inscribed with words spoken by his sister: "all he wanted is freedom"¹⁸.

Willy Brandt, Mayor of West Berlin, and the US commandant Polk laid a wreath in front of Fechter's cross, on the occasion of the first anniversary of his death:

https://www.memorial-caen.fr/10EVENT/ombre_tex22.html

With the crosses on the Bernauer Strasse, Fechter's memorial would

become the principal commemorative monument dedicated to the victims of the Wall. On the anniversary day of his death, an official ceremony would be held in the subsequent years with the participation of all-important visitors and delegations visiting West Berlin at the time, to place commemorative wreaths near the place of his death.

2.2. Western Killers

The East also had its martyrs: guards killed on duty. Their deaths would often be evoked but were rarely captured on pictures. GDR propaganda avoided showing their bodies, preferring to pay tribute to the individuals who had sacrificed themselves for the community. This honour was bestowed selectively: the Communist regime would abstain from evoking sentries killed by deserters as this might weaken the border guards' morale. Among the 18 guards killed during the years of the Wall, ten were killed by deserters.

The GDR turned the guards killed by fugitives, Western policemen or soldiers into heroes¹⁹. The East glorifies them as brave defenders of the Socialist State, provoked and attacked by warmongers. A true cult was dedicated to these men who had streets named after them, as well as barracks, schools, factories, collective farms, cultural centres, clubs or holiday camps. In the same way as for the victims of the Wall in the West, the places where these East German border guards were shot became sites of pilgrimage, spaces for contemplation, with regular wreath-laying and visits of foreign delegations, but especially of Communist Young Pioneers and school children, to whom the guards were upheld as exemplary models of faith, loyalty and sacrifice.

The year 1962 saw a particularly high number of fatalities as five guards died within a few months. In May, Peter Göring was killed by a West Berliner policeman, after having fired 44 bullets at a young boy who tried to get over the Wall²⁰. Three days before the Peter Fechter shooting, another guard, Rudi Arnstadt, was killed by a Federal guard at the border between the two States, which explains

the East German guards' hesitation to approach Fechter while he still lays agonizing.

But it was mainly the homicide of Reinhold Huhn, the “loyal son of his people”, on 18 June 1962, that encapsulated the martyrology of the border guards of the GDR. The 20-year-old corporal was killed in Berlin by a smuggler who had already helped a number of people flee to the West and, on this occasion, tried to hide the escape of his own family. The East German propaganda exploited this event immediately as it triggered enormous public emotion. Huhn's funeral became an official ceremony. A Berlin school was called after him along with five streets in East German towns, including the one on which he was killed. A commemorative bronze plaque and a stele were put up to mark the exact spot where he had died²¹.

People of Berlin paid tribute to Reinhold Huhn, an East German guard killed in action:

<https://www.bild.bundesarchiv.de/dba/de/search/?query=Bild+183-C1113-0020-002>

Then, in 1973, the latter was replaced by a massive memorial dedicated to the “fallen soldiers of the GDR, who died at the Berlin border”. The location of this memorial was chosen specially for two reasons. First, it was close to the cross that honours Peter Fechter. Secondly, it was located opposite of a spectacular new building on the Western side of the Wall that belonged to the fiercely anti-Communist West German press magnate Axel Springer. He was the owner of the daily papers *Bild* and *Morgenpost*, which had published the photos of Schumann and Fechter.

On the occasion of the 25th Anniversary of the erection of the “anti-fascist rampart”, young communists of the Reinhold – Huhn School from Berlin – Mitte, stand in front of the memorial for the guards who fell to defend the “worker's and peasant's State”:

https://www.Bundesarchiv_Bild_183-1986-0813-27%2C_Berlin%2C_Pioniere_vor_einer_Gedenkst%C3%A4tte.jpg

CONCLUSION

Well before the fall of the Wall, the GDR had lost the battle for its visual commemoration. The picture of the four militiamen in front of the Brandenburg Gate and the laying of flowers at the monument to the dead guards marked East German consciousness only superficially, to the point of being forgotten soon after the end of the Cold War. By contrast, the pictures of Schumann's leap to freedom and the death-throes of Fechter marked the collective imagination of the world, to the point of becoming an integral part of the UNESCO's "Memory of the World Register"²².

The fall of the Wall, on 9th November 1989, meant the end of the division of a city, a country and a continent. It marked also the fusion of two images of the Wall: on the one hand, the East Germans pouring across the border at the checkpoint at Bornholmer Strasse and the West Berliners climbing onto the Wall at the Brandenburg Gate. These photos, and more frequently – given the advance of technology – film clips, have been broadcast again many times since in TV and other documentaries, including those commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of the end of the Cold War. A new set of images would supersede the icons of the Cold War.

(Translated by Eleonore Heuser)

NOTES

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