The Ghosts of Berlin

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In good and in evil, Berlin is the trustee of German history, which has left its scars here as nowhere else.1
—Richard von Weizsäcker, 1983

For me the visits to this city over the past twenty years have been the only genuine experiences of Germany. History is still physically and emotionally present here. . . . Berlin is divided just like our world, our time, and each of our experiences.2
—Wim Wenders, 1987

To put it crudely, the American foot in Europe had a sore blister on it. That was West Berlin. . . . We decided the time had come to lance the blister of West Berlin.3
—Nikita Khrushchev, recalling 1961

When flowers bloom on concrete, life has triumphed.
—Berlin Wall graffiti

Greatest artwork of all time.
—Berlin Wall graffiti

What are you staring at? Never seen a wall before?
—Berlin Wall graffiti

Berlin Walls

The Monument
In a rarely visited corner of northern Berlin, piles of concrete debris fill a vast lot. This is not an unusual sight in what geographers call the “gray zones” of a city, those tracts of land somehow disqualified from more valued uses. Here, where the district of Pankow meets neighboring Wedding, machines are grinding the huge slabs of mangled concrete into smaller pieces, freeing up the land for some other use and turning the concrete into usable gravel. This ordinary industrial scene turns extraordinary when a closer look at the concrete reveals an unexpected sight: the famous spray-painted graffiti of the Berlin Wall. In 1991, this lot is a graveyard for a few of the one hundred miles of Wall that had enclosed West Berlin two years before. It is indeed located in a “gray zone” of Berlin, one of many fringe areas created by the presence of the Wall that is now reduced to rubble (fig. 1).

The Berlin Wall had been one of the city’s premier tourist attractions. More than that, it was probably the most famous structure that will ever stand in Berlin. The Pankow lot, and a few others, contained what was left of it (with a few exceptions, as we shall see). Yet such boneyards were not tourist attractions. Indeed, they were scarcely known at all. If a monument can be decommissioned, that is apparently what has happened with the Berlin Wall. Did the concrete lose its aura when it was removed from its original location? Or did that happen earlier, when it lost its power to kill, so to speak—that is, when the guards stepped aside and let the crowds through on November 9, 1989?
The Wall retained a strange kind of magic in the days and months that followed, as Berliners and tourists hacked away at the concrete. Pieces of the Wall did indeed have a special aura: they were treated as holy relics that bespoke our deliverance from the Cold War. For that brief moment, the Wall was in demand precisely because it was disappearing. Detached pieces of it were valued as evidence of an apparently spontaneous will to destroy the Wall. The cold night air during that winter of 1989–90 was filled with the sound of pik-pik-pik. First Berliners, then tourists hacked away at the Wall. They contributed in a minuscule way to the removal of the concrete, but more significant was their ritual participation in the removal of the symbolic barrier. It was in this carnival atmosphere that the concrete was divested of its murderous aura and invested with magical properties (its high asbestos content aside) that made visitors take it home to display on mantels around the world.

These magical properties translated into its market value. The Wall, symbol of the epic confrontation between capitalism and communism, became a capitalist commodity. Enterprising locals sold hacked-off pieces of concrete from tables set up at Checkpoint Charlie and the Brandenburg Gate (fig. 2). Others would rent you a hammer and chisel so that you could chop your own. Still other entrepreneurs, more ambitious and better capitalized, filled crates and trucks with this East German state property and supplied genuine Wall fragments to American department stores in time for the Christmas shopping season. The result in Berlin was a cat-and-mouse game as East German authorities tried for a short time to enforce their ownership of the concrete, making a few arrests in the process.

As it stepped gingerly into a market economy, East Germany’s brief post-Wall regime recognized that the Wall had become a commodity. It sought to assert its rights of ownership and to sell pieces of the Wall in order to raise badly needed funds for health care and historical preservation. A state-owned firm that specialized in the export of building materials was given the job of marketing the defaced concrete, now separated into its prefabricated segments. An auction in Monte Carlo in June 1990 attracted wealthy collectors and drove prices for painted segments of Wall into the tens of thousands of dollars. As East Germany passed into history, though, the Wall’s aura faded and its price fell. A final auction in Fort Lee, New Jersey, in 1993 attracted only three buyers.
What does it mean to buy a monument? A brochure prepared for the Fort Lee auction described the segments of Wall as the perfect way to “decorate the entrance hall of your corporate headquarters, museum, or estate.” Some pieces were re-erected as works of art—or were they just souvenirs? Others stood as victory monuments or Cold War booty, such as the piece (“hated symbol of, yes, an evil empire”) proudly unveiled by former president Ronald Reagan at the dedication of his presidential library.

It was difficult enough to define the meaning of Wall fragments removed to sites where they stood alone. The idea of leaving pieces on their original site made no sense at all to most Berliners. Proposals to preserve parts of the Wall, and to create a Wall memorial in Berlin, faced organized and unorganized opposition. Every suggestion to preserve one section or another was met with a chorus of objections, particularly from neighbors. The overwhelming desire, it seemed, was to be rid of the hated obstruction. Before reunification, the East Berlin office for historical preservation identified stretches of the Wall worthy of possible preservation. But the signs identifying them as historical monuments were promptly stolen, and the chopping continued unabated. The assaults with hammer and chisel preempted attempts to save pieces of particular artistic merit, such as that painted by the American artist Keith Haring, who had died of AIDS early in 1990. Haring’s section stood at the most popular pilgrimage site, next to Checkpoint Charlie, and it was quickly destroyed.

Even in its comical afterlife, the Wall continued to divide Berliners. After November 9, 1989, at least the non-German press routinely referred to the Wall in the past tense. Yet only at a few tourist sites, such as Checkpoint Charlie, did the popular onslaught come close to obliterating the concrete wall. Most of the hundred miles of border fortifications remained largely intact for months. What had disappeared, rather, was the symbolic Wall—which meant that the concrete and the symbol were no longer the same thing. To understand the Wall, then, we must understand what it meant. Symbols and monuments are invested with their meaning through human action, so we can best understand the Wall (and its physical and metaphoric demise) by looking at the way it has been treated.

Wherever human beings live, they endow the things around them with cultural meaning. Places and objects become resonant symbols that embody hopes, fears, and value. That is, they become monuments, as the Wall did. Often a monument defines a group’s identity, marking a place honored by, say, all adherents of a religious faith or all members of a community. Such monuments are rarely controversial. In Berlin, by contrast, the landscape is politicized in the extreme, and undisputed monuments are the exception. The Wall and other Berlin monuments recall controversial deeds, mostly of the recent past, deeds that prevent any consensus about the sort of things monuments are supposed to embody, such as a national identity or a common ideal. It is this deep uncertainty that makes Berlin such a contested landscape, and creates a charged atmosphere that foreigners find hard to grasp. One controversy in recent U.S. history that approached the intensity of feeling in Berlin was the design proposed for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, which reopened wounds in the nation’s sense of itself. In Berlin, Germany’s wounds still lie open everywhere.

More than a century ago, the young Friedrich Nietzsche lamented his fellow Germans’ overdeveloped sense of history. Only by selective forgetting, according to Nietzsche, can we overcome a sense of helplessness in the face of historical destiny. He argued that only the ability to forget makes creative action possible. In short, if I cannot select certain facts from history and discard others, I will never have any beliefs firm enough to act on. In the wake of Bismarck’s unification of Germany in 1871, Nietzsche was appalled by Germans’ blind Hegelian confidence that the forces of history were on their side. But the events of twentieth-century German history have given a new coloration to his thoughts. Today’s historical paralysis is a product not of complacency but of fatalistic angst. Some Germans fear that the weight of past misdeeds has made their fellow Germans uncertain what it means to be German and afraid to act in the name of Germany. The Germans thus accused see things differently: they say that any move to discard the burdens of the past will return Germany to blind confidence and thus to disaster.

Monuments are nothing if not selective aids to memory: they encourage us to remember some things and to forget others. The process of creating monuments, especially where it is openly contested, as in Berlin, shapes public memory and collective identity. That process can take very different forms, however.
There is an obvious difference between the Berlin Wall and a monument like the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C.: the builders of the former did not intend to create a monument; they had other purposes in mind. But the Wall, too, became an important monument because it took on a meaning of its own. Both kinds of monuments, the “intentional” and the “unintentional,” give form to the collective memory of a city.7

The Wall became an unintentional monument to the remarkable era in which two rival states simultaneously claimed Berlin. The division marked by the Wall, in turn, grew out of the shattering era of German history that culminated in World War II. Thus the Wall was built—literally and figuratively—atop the ruins of war, terror, and division. And it, too, is now among the ruins and memories of Berlin. The Wall—from concrete, to monument, to rubble—gives form to the story of Berlin and of Germany in our time.

The Barrier
When East German border troops and construction workers sealed the border with West Berlin on August 13, 1961, they put an end to a peculiar episode in the history of the Cold War. During the 1950s, Berlin had been the one place in Germany where East and West truly met. Families and friends scattered across the two German states could rendezvous in Berlin. Berliners lived astride the Iron Curtain that divided the rest of Europe. Two currencies and two political systems coexisted awkwardly, with people and goods passing frequently, if not always smoothly, between them. On August 13, that changed abruptly. Sixty thousand people who lived on one side and worked on the other lost their jobs. After 1961 people and vehicles in Berlin circulated within one half of the city or the other. Neighbors who could no longer see one another grew apart.

West Berliners, now walled off from their poor cousins in East Germany, began to share in the prosperity of West Germany’s postwar “economic miracle,” thanks in part to enormous subsidies from the Bonn government. West Berlin never became quite like West Germany, however: its subsidized economy, peculiar legal status, and frontier allure meant that artists, draft dodgers, and nonconformists (but also pensioners) were overrepresented, businessmen and factory workers underrepresented in its population. Nevertheless, the city displayed the neon signs, shop windows, new cars, and most of the other trappings of postwar Western prosperity.

East Berlin certainly looked different. Its gray buildings did not merely lack a coat of paint that their Western counterparts had; there were fewer new buildings, and fewer of the old ones were being renovated. Fewer cars, fewer shops, less advertising, and less bustle gave most Western visitors the impression of a dreary and lifeless place. The colors were more drab, the sounds were more muted—and the smells were different too. Two distinctive aromas pervaded the streets of East Berlin. One was the exhaust of the Trabant (or Trabbi), the tiny standard-issue East German car, whose two-stroke engine burned an acrid mixture of gasoline and oil. Trabbis were not as numerous as Volkswagens and Opels in the West, but many were about, despite a typical wait of ten years before a citizen could become the proud owner of one. The other familiar smell came from the burning of soft coal, East Germany’s only domestic source of energy and hence the main fuel both for industry and for home heating. It turned the winter sky brown in both Berlins, but its aroma was most pungent in the quiet residential streets of the East’s older neighborhoods, where (as in much of West Berlin) most apartments were still heated by coal-burning tile ovens.

Berlin had been divided into twenty districts in 1920 (fig. 3). The four occupying powers apportioned them in 1945: eight to the Soviets, six to the Americans, four to the British, and two to the French. The zigzag course of the Wall across the city was thus largely determined by arbitrary administrative decisions in 1920 and 1945. The district of Mitte (Middle), the historical center, lay in the Soviet sector, but after 1961 it bordered the Wall on its southern, western, and most of its northern side. Across the Wall to its south, the tenements of Kreuzberg were cut off not only from the city center but also from the parks in Treptow, to the east. East Berliners who lived just north of the center could no longer walk across the sectoral boundary to Wedding’s many small shops and cinemas. Those businesses, in turn, lost their customers in 1961 and many soon closed.

By severing long-established paths of inner-city circulation, the Wall created peculiar urban backwaters in the center of Berlin, devoid of the usual bustle of pedestrians and—what was often more noticeable—of automobiles. This was true, in different ways, on both sides. The crucial difference was that the
approaches to the Wall’s Eastern side were carefully controlled. Apart from official ceremonies, Easterners were discouraged from approaching the Wall and even taking note of its existence. Those East Berliners who lived in the streets next to the Wall had to adjust to special restrictions, intrusions, and inconveniences. Friends from outside the neighborhood could never just drop by, for example: permission had to be obtained from the police.

Unlike Easterners, West Berliners were free to heap scorn upon the Wall, or to gaze over it, but in the end they, too, mostly sought peace of mind by accepting the Wall or ignoring it, by coming to think of their city as an island connected by causeways and air corridors to a Western mainland. The commonly used “island” metaphor is an apt one, since the Wall created quiet recreational spaces on the newly established edge and, more generally, came to be seen—or rather not seen—as the edge of the world.

In contrast to the East, the Western side of the Wall was a notably disordered space. Neglect of the streets, bridges, and other structures abutting the border was apparent to anyone coming from other parts of West Berlin or West Germany. The proximity of the Wall devalued old neighborhoods, particularly in Kreuzberg, and their working-class populations were increasingly supplanted by an odd mix of Turkish immigrant workers and the growing West Berlin alternative society of self-styled dropouts, artists, musicians, punks, anarchists, and squatters in abandoned buildings. The marginal location of West Berlin in general and eastern Kreuzberg in particular nurtured the Kreuzberg “scene.” (When the Wall disappeared, Kreuzberg became centrally located, and real estate speculation doomed the “scene.”)

The act of crossing the forbidden border naturally became wrapped in its own aura of liminality. The ordeal of a legal border crossing was experienced at least once by many people, even, by the 1980s, many East Germans. Within days of closing the border in 1961, the East German authorities had reduced the number of checkpoints within the city to seven, most of which they designated for exclusive use either by West Berliners, West Germans, or foreigners. The most famous was the crossing for foreigners, Checkpoint Charlie—as the Americans (and everyone else) had named their official gateway to the Soviet sector. Because crossing into East Berlin represented a journey far greater than the short distance across the street, Checkpoint Charlie became associated with mystery and intrigue, a reputation enhanced by dozens of spy novels. So, too, did the Glienecke Bridge, which connected West Berlin with Potsdam, the place where East and West exchanged spies.

Westerners could also travel by subway or elevated train to the Friedrichstrasse rail station in East Berlin and formally cross the border there. Friedrichstrasse was the typical departure point for the fortunate East Germans who received permission to travel to the West, and for Westerners ending family visits. Departing travelers were processed through a new annex to the station. The building, a place of painful leave-taking, acquired the nickname “Palace of Tears.”

This suitably depressed-looking building stood on a triangular lot whose fate had long been in limbo. For a 1922 architectural competition for the site, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe had sketched a revolutionary glass skyscraper. His sketch has found a place in every history of modern architecture, but neither it nor anything else was built on the site for decades. In 1992 a group of investors proposed to tear down the empty Palace of Tears and finally to build Mies’s glass tower. Ironically, they shared the same motivation as the sponsors of the 1922 competition, who had spurned Mies’s design in favor of another. In both cases, an attention-getting design was supposed to bring an exemption from munici-
pal height limits for the construction of a more profitable office building. But the authorities proved unwilling on both occasions. Instead, the Palace of Tears was left standing for the time being and converted into a nightclub, which kept the notorious name.

One of the oddest incidents in the Wall’s history was the only mass flight from West to East. It was the unwanted result of a minor diplomatic bargain intended to smooth East-West relations. In 1988 the two sides agreed to exchange several tiny parcels of land in order to regularize their borders. One parcel transferred from East to West lay in the city center, between Potsdamer Platz and the Tiergarten. This “Lenné triangle” protruded so awkwardly into West Berlin that the East had left it on the west side of the Wall in 1961 rather than bother to enclose it. As a result, these ten acres had sat completely neglected for years. But the West wanted the land for a long-planned expressway. During the summer of 1988, Green-minded West Berliners began protesting the expressway and counting rare plant and butterfly species in the wild growth of the triangle. Joined by anarchists for whom this ungoverned place was a utopia and an adventure, they set up tents to occupy the land. The annoyed West Berlin authorities were helpless to intervene on this foreign territory, the relevant Allied powers (British and Soviet) chose not to interfere, and the East Germans loudly denounced the “inhuman police terror” and the violations of their sovereignty as Western police and protesters clashed repeatedly along the border between West Berlin and the temporarily autonomous enclave. When the territory was officially transferred to the West on July 1, the West Berlin police seized it by force. The protesters thereupon scaled the Wall to the East to escape arrest. Eastern border guards escorted them away, served them breakfast, asked them to use a regular border crossing for their next visit to the German Democratic Republic, and sent them home on the subway.

The Symbol
The story of divided Berlin is more than a story of concrete and construction workers. But the Berlin Wall remains at the center of that story because it was more than mere concrete. After all, the Wall that ceased to exist one night in 1989 was not the concrete but rather the system of East German border security.

In other words, the “Berlin Wall” came to signify all the consequences of the division of Berlin and of Europe.

It is a well-known fact that the Wall was put up in a single day. Virtually the entire perimeter of West Berlin—a hundred miles—was indeed sealed on August 13, 1961, but with barbed wire. The first pieces of concrete wall were put up two days later (fig. 4). Over the years the first, hastily erected block-and-mortar wall was in turn replaced, more than once, by taller and stronger barriers built with prefabricated concrete forms. And the wall itself was only part of the border fortifications. By gradually removing structures and hindrances on their side, the East German authorities established a security zone accessible only to guards. Here was the so-called death strip, of varying width, punctuated by observation towers; enclosed by walls or

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The Wall being built, Harzerstrasse, August 16, 1961. Courtesy of German Information Center.
fences on either side; and secured with bright lights, barbed wire, tank barriers, dog runs, and carefully raked sand. Contrary to its name and reputation, then, the security system was in its essence less a wall than a controlled sequence of empty, visible spaces. More than that, “the Wall” signified a set of activities—searches, patrols, observation, and identification checks at the crossing points—that protected the border.

The name stuck, however. From the Western side it was the concrete wall that marked the border’s menacing presence. And only on that side was it officially a “wall.” Eastern officials dubbed their new edifice the “antifascist protective rampart.” By the 1980s, they rarely referred to any physical structure, speaking rather of “the border” or of “border security.” Use of the word “wall” (Mauer) was strictly forbidden in the East. This rule has usually been interpreted as an Orwellian denial of reality, but we must also consider it as an attempt—perhaps equally Orwellian—to control the dangerous implications of figurative language.

Why was the name “Wall” embraced by some and eschewed by others? The notion of a wall carries historical baggage: through many centuries of European history, walls were basic to the identity as well as the security of European cities. Berlin itself was a walled town for most of its history, until the 1860s. Both East and West Berlin honored this tradition. A remnant of Berlin’s medieval wall was excavated and displayed in East Berlin’s Waisenstrasse, and during the 1980s West Berlin’s archaeological office excavated a segment of the city’s eighteenth-century customs wall in Stresemannstrasse. The fact that the course of the latter wall coincided for a distance with the border between East and West Berlin, and hence with the 1961 wall, offered the new Berlin Wall a historical pedigree. The official Eastern name, “antifascist protective rampart,” also invoked the traditional wall, if not the traditional enemy, by alluding to the kind of fortification that had protected earlier towns. The same went for each side’s descriptions of West Berlin: “imperialist bridgehead” for some, “bastion of freedom” and “bulwark of the Western world” for others.

But a yawning historical caesura divided the wall of 1961 from its antecedents. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have been an age of mobility, communication, and integration. Modernity has tended to free cities from all traditional fetters. Walls fell or were riddled with openings for roads, canals, and railroads. In other words, in an earlier age, with much less human mobility, rulers would not have needed and subjects would not have noticed this barrier to mobility. But that is precisely the sense in which the Berlin Wall of 1961 connoted an attempt, by political fiat, to reverse the growing economic and social mobility of the modern world. The name “Wall,” shunned by its builders, called attention to this anachronism and came to signify a crime against history as well as humanity: a “wall of shame” (Schanzmauer). The competing description “antifascist protective rampart” became farcical and fell into disrepute.

It was immediately obvious that the Wall was antithetical to the mobility and circulation characteristic of a modern city. In Berlin a political decision had disrupted invisible forms of modern circulation usually taken for granted—gas and water mains, for example. More visibly, it blocked streets, and streetcar tracks led straight into the Wall (see fig. 4). Most of Berlin’s intercity rail stations became useless and were abandoned. The elevated rail stations above Nollendorfplatz and Bülowstrasse, on a line that went nowhere, became flea markets. And how was a subway system supposed to work in a walled city? Two subway lines connected northern and southern parts of West Berlin by passing under central East Berlin, gliding through ghostly stations where no train had stopped since 1961.

Meanwhile, other products of modern technology passed effortlessly over the Wall: air pollution and broadcast signals. So, for shorter distances, did the amplified sounds of internationally famous rock musicians who played at outdoor concerts by the Reichstag. East German youths gathered behind the Wall to hear the stars they were unable to see; altercations ensued when the police drove them away.

Heightening the poignancy of the Wall’s limits on mobility was the importance of travel in the minds of East German citizens. Their education and relative prosperity made them especially eager travelers even by the standards of the late twentieth century, and their government knew (and acknowledged) that otherwise obedient citizens demanded the “right to travel.” Many became obsessed with the Wall that visibly barred them from West Berlin, West Germany, and beyond. East German leaders knew that their citizens were tempted by—and had to be protected from—the fruits of capitalism. The Wall held back
the seductive bustle and mobility that accompanied free trade and bourgeois society.

When we think of the Wall, then, we think of the shocking division of Berlin in all its ramifications. And because we knew Cold War Berlin above all as a divided city, the Wall became inseparable from the city's identity. Clear evidence of this link is a popular postcard sold in Berlin since the 1980s. A picture of the Great Wall of China, it reads simply, "Greetings from Berlin"—Berlin being the place with the Wall (fig. 5). In the language of semiotics, the Wall is the signifier; Berlin, the signified. The postcard also served as an ironic commentary on the relative insignificance of the Wall as a physical structure. Tourists were often disappointed not to find a more imposing structure: it was, on its Western side, a plain concrete wall thirteen feet high, not at all like its Chinese namesake.

The plain concrete wall brimmed with meaning. Not only did it signify the carefully maintained division of Berlin, it also came to connote the division of a German nation, or of Europe, as otherwise known by Churchill's metaphor of the "iron curtain." The Wall became most famous as the preeminent Cold War symbol. That symbolic linkage is itself ironic, since the Wall could be said to mark the end of Berlin as a Cold War battlefield. Berlin became an international problem as the division of Germany hardened after 1945, since the Western allies' sectors of the city lay in the middle of the Soviet occupation zone (fig. 6). The city then became a flashpoint of international conflict during the Berlin blockade of 1948–49, when American and British planes foiled a Soviet attempt to detach Berlin from the sphere of the Western powers. More than any other event, the triumphant Berlin Airlift made the city a symbol of Western resolve in the Cold War. As a practical matter, however, the airlift reinforced rather than resolved the Berlin anomaly. It hastened the creation, in 1949, of two separate German states, leaving only Berlin's status in limbo. The United States and its allies were determined to hold West Berlin, despite its vulnerability, while the Soviet bloc wished to remove a painful embarrassment. During the late 1950s, the Soviet Union under Khrushchev again sought to force the Berlin issue. Its East German ally pressed for urgent action because the virtually unrestricted freedom of movement within the city was enabling thousands of its most skilled workers and professionals to flee west. The Western powers would not back down from the commitment to Berlin they had made at the time of the airlift, despite fears that the Berlin crisis could not be solved by any means short of war.

Hence Western leaders breathed a secret sigh of relief on August 13, 1961, when a midnight action by the East German army sealed off the sectoral lines in Berlin and began the construction of a barrier all the way around West Berlin, ostensibly to foil an imminent Western invasion. Because the West did not intervene, this sudden move effectively resolved the conflicting claims to the entire city: the West implicitly accepted division and the East surrendered its claim to West Berlin. It could thus...
be said that the Wall, by removing Berlin from center stage in the Cold War, marked the city's irrelevance. But it also gave divided Berlin a visible signifier.

The political rituals of Cold War leaders added important new connotations to the Wall's meaning. Immediately after the Wall's construction, Berlin represented something of a political embarrassment, a place to avoid, since Western leaders—Adenauer of West Germany, Macmillan of Britain, Kennedy of the United States—were criticized for their failure to respond to it, and since they could scarcely admit to being relieved at its construction. Before long, however, West Germany and its allies began to exploit the propaganda value of the Wall as a symbol of Communism's failure. By the time of Kennedy's triumphal visit in June of 1963, a pilgrimage to the safely fortified forward post had become a favorite photo opportunity. Every state visitor in Bonn was if possible brought to Berlin to view the infamous Wall. President Ronald Reagan's visit in 1987, for example, sounded the metaphor of mobility and connectedness. He stood before the walled-off Brandenburg Gate and demanded, “Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate. Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall.”

The East could respond in kind: it declared the statements of Western politicians at the Wall to be a provocation showing the necessity and the efficacy of the border fortifications, which they, too, proudly displayed to guests—at least to carefully selected ones. One of the old guardhouses flanking the Brandenburg Gate housed an exhibition justifying the “modern border.” An occasional Western journalist was admitted, as were delegations and dignitaries from friendly countries. Some of the latter left their words of praise in a guest book now preserved in a Berlin archive. East Germany ritually commemorated the heroic defense of the border every August 13, granted the border guards an annual day of honor, and taught all schoolchildren the correct interpretation of the events of 1961, when alert security measures had staved off war.

In this battle to define a symbol, each side was trying to make the Berlin Wall comprehensible in ways that would justify its cause. Each side knew it had to redefine what a wall meant. Traditionally, a wall has an inside and an outside; it protects the people on one side from those on the other. But which was the outside of the wall that encircled West Berlin? Who was being walled in, and who kept out? West Berliners, physically surrounded by the Wall, felt they were the ones penned in. But so did most East Germans.

In the end, both sides came to think of the Wall as a temporal more than a spatial barrier. Western leaders denounced the Wall as anachronistic: a relic from an earlier age, it was built to keep progress out, and people in. Meanwhile, the Wall's builders justified their work as a necessary defense against the atavistic forces of the West. According to this view, informed by Marxist theories of historical development, the proletariat was defending itself against lingering influences of the bourgeoisie. Specifically, it was “fascism” that threatened the march of socialist progress. Marxists usually defined fascism as a degenerate form of late bourgeois capitalism. The “antifascist protective rampart” shielded the triumphant proletariat from the remnants of pre-1945 German fascism (that is, from Nazism). The Western view was different, of course, but there is a striking parallel: according to it, too, the Wall's necessity arose from a historical discrepancy between the two systems. Liberal narratives of history, like Marxist ones, describe a progressive development: the unfolding of an individualistic and democratic order. Part of that development is the growing freedom of movement mentioned above. Thus the construction of a wall turned back the clock to a constricted and authoritarian age. The West has often defined that age as “totalitarian.” Theories of “totalitarianism,” a word connoting a fundamental similarity between Nazism and Communism, portrayed the Cold War as a continuation of the West's struggle in World War II and, in the German context, East German Communist leader Walter Ulbricht as Hitler's successor. Again, the implication was that enemies from the past hid behind the Wall. Thus East and West agreed that the Wall was a temporal barrier, dividing past from present, and that the other side harbored the unredeemed heirs of Hitler.

On an official level, the ideological interpretation of the Wall thus became part of the Cold War's propaganda battle: “antifascist protective rampart” versus “wall of shame.” It is difficult to gauge the extent to which popular views affirmed official positions, particularly in the East. In the West, however, official and popular views certainly converged in treating the Wall as a place of death. The attention of the mass media and their proven ideas about newsworthy topics explain the attention given to unsuccessful escape attempts, most of which ended in capture
and imprisonment, some in death. The first fatal shooting came within days of the border closing. The most famous death occurred a year later, when eighteen-year-old Peter Fechter, shot just short of the final obstacle, bled to death while crying for help just beyond the reach of American soldiers and West Berlin policemen. Just as newsworthy, though, were those who successfully defied death. A privately run but officially sanctioned museum on the Western side of Checkpoint Charlie drew crowds of visitors by displaying the paraphernalia of imaginative escapes: hot-air balloons, cars with secret hiding places, homemade Red Army uniforms, and debris from tunnels dug under the Wall and trucks that crashed through it. The museum’s founder, Rainer Hildebrandt, a human-rights campaigner, sought to draw public attention to the plight of those trapped behind the Iron Curtain.

At least seventy-eight people died in confrontations at the Wall during its twenty-eight-year existence. The Wall was not among the leading causes of mortality in East or West Berlin, but the political context of the suffering of families and neighbors lent the Wall its aura of brutality and inhumanity. West Berliners put up crosses and simple markers to commemorate many of the dead, whether their identities were known or not. These became a part of the landscape of the Wall, and clearly marked its Western side as a memorial (fig. 7). Western politicians could key their visits to the Wall to the tone set by the crosses, exhibiting an appropriate combination of solemnity and outrage.

Much less known in the West was the corresponding process of commemoration on the Eastern side, although the officially controlled Eastern media gave similar prominence to its stories of heroism and suffering. Several East German border guards died in confrontations at the inner-city border, and they were officially honored as martyrs to the defense of the socialist state. Four stone monuments in East Berlin commemorated their deaths (fig. 8). Despite the regime’s lack of credibility with its own people, the pathos of victimhood could sway their emotions. Ordinary East Germans found it plausible that “bandits” in the West took potshots at border guards doing their duty, a story not corroborated by Western accounts of any of the incidents. And not only ordinary citizens: even as he awaited trial for murders at the Wall, Erich Honecker, when asked if he regretted the deaths there, would only reply that he was sorry for the murders of twenty-five East German border guards.

Graffiti added a different dimension to the Western side of the Wall. Kreuzberg boasted the most impressive display of Wall
graffiti, if that word may be used to encompass the personal outbursts, political slogans, posters, painting, attachments, and occasional destruction wrought upon the Western side of the Wall. The Wall attracted painted expressions of defiance in its early years, but it began to flourish as a mural only in the 1970s, when it (that is, the original, western perimeter of the fortifications) was rebuilt with huge prefabricated concrete slabs that created a smooth canvas (fig. 9). The entire West Berlin side of the Wall, actually within East Berlin territory but effectively free of anyone's political control, served as an all-purpose bulletin board as well as an experimental studio for art with political overtones. The Western wall of the death strip thus became a showcase of spontaneity and a tourist attraction. The sharp contrast with the purposes of the Wall's builders became part of the Wall's fascination and meaning. A small element of risk added a further tinge of excitement: on rare occasions East German border guards slipped through concealed doors in the Wall and nabbed graffiti artists defacing the border fortifications.

By making the Wall visible, the colorful graffiti (or art) also counteracted West Berliners' inclinations to ignore it. Much of the graffiti underscored the efforts of Western political leaders to heap scorn on the Wall. That was obvious in the case of the many pictorial and verbal denunciations of the Wall itself and the regime behind it. More subtly, one recurring theme of the Wall paintings highlighted the sense of historical anomaly described above. This was the attempt to disrupt the solidity and continuity of the Wall by suggesting the existence of openings in it or the process of breaking through it. Many artists painted climbing or jumping figures; others employed trompe l'oeil (fig. 10). The effect of this graffiti was to call attention to the injustice, anomaly, or artificiality of the barrier.

At the same time, however, the levity of much Wall art threatened to blur the Western message. The sculptor Joseph Beuys, enfant terrible of postwar West German art, aimed to confound official opinion when he declared that it would be best to increase the Wall's height by five centimeters to give it more aesthetically pleasing proportions. This set the tone for many of the more sophisticated graffiti artists, whose work, while giving scant comfort to the builders of the "antifascist defensive rampart," subverted the categories of Western as well as Eastern political posturing. Did lovers, angels, or bathroom fixtures have anything to do with the Cold War? The very process of appropriating the Wall as art made it, arguably, less ugly, less obscene, less criminal. The kaleidoscopic Western side of the Wall became either a showcase of Western freedom or embarrassing evidence of Western decadence. Whereas in earlier years the East periodi-
cally whitewashed the Western side of the Wall, in 1987 it was the Western authorities who hurriedly obliterated anti-American and anti-Reagan slogans before the president’s visit to the Brandenburg Gate.

The German Democratic Republic (GDR) knew how to prevent graffiti and other spontaneous displays of private sentiment at home. Apart from officially sponsored commemorations, this side of the Wall—of the border, that is—was not available for contemplation. Easterners were compelled to turn their backs on it and build their lives within “Berlin, capital of the German Democratic Republic,” as the city was officially known. Official Eastern parlance knew no “East Berlin,” only a remote and infrequently mentioned “West Berlin,” which appeared as a blank space on the GDR’s city maps. On Western maps, by contrast, it was the Wall that was often inconspicuous, indicated only by a stripe barely distinguishable from those dividing the districts within East or West Berlin. The maps on each side serve as evidence of denial and wishful thinking.

Although we cannot look at any Eastern equivalent of Wall graffiti, we can learn something about Easterners’ reactions to the Wall from a book published in 1973 by a prominent East German psychiatrist who had fled to the West two years before. The title of his book, wrote Dr. Dietried Müller-Hegemann, was a term already in common use in Berlin.16 The Berlin Wall Disease (Die Berliner Mauerkrankheit) is a collection of case studies of patients suffering from depression and other psychological ills, often expressed in physical ailments and, according to the author, attributable to the border closing in 1961. These case studies of divided families and of pressures for ideological conformity clearly reflect the stresses of life in a police state, in which the Wall had become established as the paramount symbol of control. But Müller-Hegemann saw a more direct connection between the Wall and “wall disease.” He found that patients reacted directly to the shock of the Wall’s appearance—that is, to the sudden imposition of strict limits on mobility that left them no possibility of leaving the country or even, in many cases, seeing children, parents, spouses, or lovers. Without trivializing these people’s symptoms, we can see “wall disease” as an extreme version of the widely shared sense that the Wall violated normal and accepted possibilities. Müller-Hegemann links the pain of the Wall more closely to its violation of expectations when he contrasts the 1960s, an era of peace and growing prosperity in the GDR, with times of war and mass suffering. Indeed, many of his patients had suffered similar setbacks during and after World War II without the psychological consequences, precisely because their expectations and hopes were appropriately modest.17 “Wall disease” thus takes to pathological extremes the more general sense of historical inappropriateness stirred by the Wall.

The Zipper

The concrete barrier in Berlin stood as a signifier in many discourses: psychopathology, families’ grief, political ideology, urban identity, and modern art. And it loomed large in the debates over German national identity that raged throughout the decades of division and still persist today. Since both German regimes claimed Berlin as their city and their capital, it was inevitable that the Wall, Berlin’s preeminent structure and symbol, would be drawn into these debates. In divided Germany, Berlin (especially West Berlin) was always the front line. The citizens of the divided city were the most prominent victims of division.

The suffering of these victims redeemed all Germans. Since the airlift of 1948–49, Berliners, more than other Germans, had been able to claim the hearts of their former enemies in the west. In a famous speech during the airlift, West Berlin’s mayor, Ernst Reuter, demanded, “Peoples of the world, look upon this city!” At least in the West, they looked, and they saw freedom-loving heroes where only a few years before they had seen Hitler’s minions. It was a thrilling moment for Germans who, like Reuter, had opposed the Nazis. They had been sustained through the years of the Third Reich by a belief in a better Germany; now the Western world endorsed their cause. But former Nazis also basked in their redemption: all anticommunist Berliners stood together, and bygones could be bygones. West Berlin celebrated its new identity with its first major postwar monument, the Airlift Memorial dedicated by Reuter at Tempelhof airport in 1951.

The Wall later supplanted the airlift as the symbol of Berlin’s role as Cold War victim. The most celebrated visit to the walled city was probably that of President John F. Kennedy on June 26, 1963. After reviewing the Wall, he proceeded to the Schöneberg Town Hall, home of the West Berlin government,
where he gave a speech famous for the German phrase with which he concluded. His words underscored the political symbolism of Berlin: “All free men, wherever they may live, are citizens of Berlin. And therefore, as a free man, I take pride in the words, ‘Ich bin ein Berliner.’” What did it mean for Kennedy to call himself a Berliner? Certainly he was not about to pronounce himself a German. “Berliners” were victims of Communist tyranny and virtuous exemplars of a noble steadfastness, and they were portrayed as such in American Cold War propaganda. The adoption of the victim’s perspective made it possible to turn the shame of the Wall into a position of moral superiority. For Western opponents of the division of Germany, the Wall came to represent the justice rather than the futility of their cause. West Berliners first saw the Wall as a defeat, driving a wedge between them and their allied protectors, who had not acted to stop its construction. But the Wall could become a Western political symbol when its existence was interpreted as proof that only force could keep Germany divided. Incidents like the death of Peter Fechter convinced most Westerners that the Wall was both cruel and absurd. The Wall, then, showed the division of Germany to be “unnatural,” meaning that Germany was “naturally” and properly a single nation.

In the peculiar state of German nationalism after World War II, the Berlin Wall—the looming obstacle to national unity—became the West’s favorite nationalist symbol. The ritual denunciations of the Wall—speeches, demonstrations, graffiti, crosses—were the most acceptable expressions of German national feeling in the West. At the same time, the very existence of the Wall served to displace any anxieties about German identity onto it. It was “a zipper,” observed the East Berlin writer Lutz Rathenow, linking Germans even as it divided them. The separation enforced by the Wall made it easy to explain away any apparent disunity among Germans and to render harmless the whole idea of German identity. This is the point made recently by the West Berlin writer Peter Schneider: “it was the Wall alone that preserved the illusion that the Wall was the only thing separating the Germans.”

The Wall, then, signified both division and unity. Under the circumstances it was an ideal national symbol, affirming a divided German self as well as an underlying unity. The Wall seemed to explain the existence of apparently irreconcilable characteristics of “Germans”—not only in the form of the simplistic but persistent categories of “good” and “bad” Germans. Many analyses of German national character—a favorite topic for decades—resorted to images of dualism, division, exclusion, and separation. The existence of the Wall at once confirmed these beliefs and offered a way to account for them without denying an essential bond between all Germans. The East-West division embodied by the Wall permitted Germans themselves to project “otherness” onto their fellows. On the one hand, Germans could interpret official propaganda as implying that the people on the other side of the Wall monopolized the prejudiced, predatory, or authoritarian traits of the bad old days. On the other hand, it was common in both Germanies to characterize the East as the “old” Germany or the “real” Germany, implying that the GDR was the repository of traditional German virtues, unspoiled by foreign (especially American) influences.

As a counterpoint to assertions of German unity, the GDR offered its official ideology of German antifascism—looking not to the old Germany or the whole Germany, but to the better Germany. Obviously, antifascism was also (like anticommunism and opposition to Germany’s division) defined by what it was not. The “antifascist protective rampart” became its most famous symbol, but since hardly anyone in East or West long took seriously its “antifascist” purpose, the Wall also did much to discredit the entire notion. In other words, as the idea of an “antifascist protective rampart” became an embarrassment, the state that built such a “rampart” (or “wall,” or “modern border”) lost its legitimacy. In 1961, Communist leaders saw the Wall as crucial to the survival of the “antifascist” German state; by 1989, the Wall had failed—and so, apparently, had the state. With the demise of the Wall, the imagined unity of Germany yielded to a real embrace of East and West Germans.

The Relic

East Germany is now gone, and most Germans seem to want to forget it. The same holds true of the Wall. Since 1989 the former death strip has bit by bit been reintegrated into the city. Within two years it was difficult to tell where the Wall had stood. That was only natural and proper, in the view of most Berliners: with the Wall would vanish the painful memory of division. An early proposal to mark the Wall’s former course across the city re-
ceived little support. (By 1995, however, the Wall had become sufficiently historical for the plan to be revived.)

Most people who hated the Wall as an obstacle to German unity wanted to see all traces of it disappear as quickly as possible. Their sense of triumph expressed itself in the spontaneous destruction of the Wall. But others could concede the necessity of preserving a little piece of it. For example, the Berliner Morgenpost, of the conservative and nationalist Axel Springer newspaper chain, editorialized:

A few meters of Wall should remain standing as a memorial. That may be painful to some, but this decision is unavoidable. This structure of concrete and barbed wire has caused too much inhumanity and too much suffering, too many people striving for freedom were murdered at it, for its complete removal to be warranted. The small remnant of the Wall—at whichever location it may stand—must forever admonish that a people may never again be arbitrarily divided.20

The reason for preservation was thus to protect a place of national memory and to keep alive the lesson of the Wall: the unbreakable unity of the German people.

This was a remarkably rare position. Most citizens in East and West who called for preservation of part of the Wall certainly were not motivated by conventional patriotism. Indeed, they were likely to be seen as disgruntled opponents of unification seeking to spoil the triumphant moment. Instead of a victory monument, they had in mind a place of solemn remembrance. Although the Morgenpost was not really proposing a victory monument either, the attempt to enshrine the Wall as a symbol of national strength was bound to leave that impression. And any proclamation of German strength remains a touchy subject at home and abroad. A Wall memorial that proclaimed the message the Morgenpost wanted would be enormously controversial. Nationalists thus found it easier to think of the Wall as a symbol of division than as a symbol of unity. Typically they wished not to preserve the Wall, but to destroy it—that is, to forget it.

It was not easily forgotten, however. The Wall, now invisible, became the symbol of Germany’s identity crisis in the 1990s as well. In his novella of divided Berlin, The Wall Jumper (1982), Peter Schneider had prophesied that “tearing down the Wall inside our heads will take longer than any demolition job on the visible Wall.”21 After 1989 the “wall inside our heads” became the way Germans described post-Wall problems of German national identity—specifically, the growing sense of difference between Easterners and Westerners (“Ossis” and “Wessis”). In another use of the same metaphor, the slogan “I want my wall back” on lips and T-shirts in 1990 expressed some West Berliners’ quixotic flight from the specter of unification. In the fairy-tale version of unification, the disappearance of the murderous system of border security was supposed to lead to the happily-ever-after marriage of East and West. But the joyful embrace at the Wall soon gave way to grumbling about overbearing and exploitative Wessis and shiftless and uncouth Ossis. Berlin without a Wall in the 1990s was not a coherent whole, which meant that the Wall had betrayed the hopes invested in it. Its disappearance raised new questions about Berlin’s identity.

What, then, to do with the Wall? Which of its meanings deserved preservation or remembrance? Proponents of a Wall memorial faced serious problems: securing the physical remains, overcoming the desire to forget, and somehow presenting an interpretation of the Wall that satisfied a sufficiently large or influential constituency. The German Historical Museum (Berlin’s new national museum) proposed to preserve a block-long section of the border fortifications as part of a Wall memorial. So that the very possibility of a memorial would not be precluded, in 1990 the museum fenced off the hacked-up stretch of Wall. In addition, it dismantled and stored the fences, lights, tripwires, and watchtowers that had separated East from West Berlin. Museum officials planned to reconstruct the entire border on a third of the block. This was the key to the entire project, they argued: the famous Wall alone could not give future visitors a sense of the way the border functioned. The rest of the site would then be devoted to a solemn memorial to victims of the Wall.

The museum had chosen one of the most famous points in the Wall, despite its location outside central Berlin. Pictures from Bernauer Strasse had captured the world’s attention in 1961. The street divided the district of Mitte from the West
Berlin district of Wedding, and by historical accident the actual border was the East Berlin side of the street. Here the front windows of hundreds of Easterners’ apartments faced a West Berlin street. In the days after August 13, as the border troops sealed doors and ground-floor windows, many residents on upper floors climbed or jumped into the street, aided by West Berliners and hindered by Eastern guards. With the improvements in border security, the street’s fame faded, although one of the most famous tunnels under the wall, through which fifty-seven people escaped in 1964, passed under Bernauer Strasse. Long before that, the famous windows were bricked up and the residents relocated, and in the mid-1960s the buildings were torn down (except for the front facades up to a height of twelve feet) to clear the way for the border security zone. Until their replacement in the 1980s, the bricked-up first-floor facades continued to serve as the Wall in Bernauer Strasse, and the neo-Gothic Church of the Reconciliation stood inaccessible in no-man’s-land until it was blown up in 1985. West Berlin tourist buses could be counted on to drive down the street.

The desire to forget the Wall manifested itself in several different forms of opposition to the memorial proposed here. Some local officials pronounced the wide swath of open land an ideal site for new inner-city housing. The city’s traffic planners quickly designated it as the site for a multilane thoroughfare—also badly needed, in their view. Across Bernauer Strasse, on the West Berlin side of the proposed memorial, stands the Lazarus home for the chronically ill. Its director announced that to preserve the Wall outside their front windows would damage the health of the patients by causing depression and anguish. His prognosis seemed to imply that “wall disease” would persist until its visible cause was eradicated. Further obstacles arose from the fact that the death strip included land the GDR had expropriated from private owners. Among those who came forward with claims after 1989 was the church of St. Sophia, whose cemetery had included part of the proposed memorial’s site. The church’s pastor declared that the Wall memorial would represent a second desecration of the cemetery.

The local and federal governments nevertheless approved the memorial. But property claims as well as financing and design long remained unsettled, and the fenced-in piece of Wall sat untouched for years. Neither popular nor commercial pressures created a sense of urgency. This Wall memorial would not offer the same kind of tourist attraction as either the functioning Wall or the crumbling Wall. The drama of unresolved conflict, the sense of active participation, and (if the museum had its way) the overt commerciality would be lacking.

Meanwhile, Wall tourism did find a place to thrive into the 1990s, thanks to a private initiative. During 1990, tourists seeking to relive the Wall experience wandered through the derelict death strip and sprayed graffiti on interior sections of Wall previously inaccessible. Greetings from and to America were common: “Tammy, Mike, John, and everyone else from New Jersey, you are now on the Wall.” But soon those walls were gone. What is now the longest intact piece of the Wall stands along Mühlenstrasse, a busy six-lane street connecting central Berlin with southeastern districts. The street parallels a stretch of the Spree River that had marked the border. The concrete wall along Mühlenstrasse was thus the inner wall that kept Easterners out of the security zone, a blank, invisible, desolate space a world away from the colorful graffiti on the Western side. Its out-of-the-way location made possible the “East Side Gallery” (the name is in English, a Scottish gallerist, Christine MacLean, having been instrumental in its creation) (fig. 11). In the course of 1990, the “gallery” took shape in a mural. First a few artists came, then others followed, each claiming a section of the nearly mile-long stretch of wall. In the end 118 artists from around the world produced 106 paintings while breathing the fumes from thousands of East German cars and trucks and negotiating the cars parked or even junked on the sidewalk. Much of the work features widely recognized motifs. Many of the artists were from the former Soviet bloc, and their paintings proclaim the messages of Eastern European political dissidence. Others recall traumas of German history, especially Kristallnacht and other events in the Nazi persecution of Jews. Many paintings, like much of the old Wall graffiti, illustrate events or fantasies of breaking through or leaping over the Wall itself. Gradually this mural came to wider public attention, and Mühlenstrasse joined the short list of Wall segments slated for possible preservation.

By 1993, when the East Side Gallery’s preservation was officially decreed, word had spread that this was the place to experi-
ence the historic Wall. Tourists (mostly Americans, at least in the summer) dodged traffic to photograph themselves and their friends in front of the painted wall. At a kiosk they could buy postcards and T-shirts of the paintings. Some could not resist the temptation to inscribe some traditional Wall graffiti—much to the dismay of the gallery’s creators and their new municipal backers, who wished to preserve the site and its art. Unlike the Bernauer Strasse memorial, hardly anything here was an authentic remnant of divided Berlin. The concrete was real enough, but for the tourists it illustrated something that had happened on the Western side of the Wall. The artists’ sentiments and images, interesting as they were, belonged to the post-Wall era. As a historical site, this was a welter of confusion; but as a popular attraction, it worked—briefly. By 1995, the artists’ paint was peeling or was disappearing under uninspired graffiti. Removed from a politically liminal space and a sense of transitory creation, the Wall became a mere ghost of its former self.

Thus one might argue that the best way to reproduce the experience of the Wall would be a theme-park reenactment, such as has been offered or proposed by entrepreneurs in Manchester, England, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and in the Brandenburg countryside outside Berlin. Tourists could visit a rebuilt Wall and be interrogated by actors in border-guard uniforms. However, the director of the German Historical Museum, Christoph Stöhl, argued that the Bernauer Strasse memorial retained the authenticity of the original site and thus was superior to a “Disneyland” project that could be built anywhere.22

Authenticity is, after all, what Berlin has to offer. At the height of the Berlin crisis, in 1960, a British journalist proposed that West Berlin be abandoned and a new Berlin be built in West Germany on the empty land of Lüneburg Heath. Of course the idea of moving West Berlin lock, stock, and barrel was too absurd to deserve serious thought (although the GDR’s official party newspaper chimed in with the suggestion that all problems would be solved if only a handful of spies, Nazis, and Cold Warriors were packed up and sent to Berlin, Wisconsin).23 A historic city is not Disneyland, and it is indeed as an authentic site that Berlin fascinates visitors: here stood the Wall; here walked Hitler; here spoke Bismarck; here rolled the tanks. Berlin will long remain the city of the Wall, even if the concrete ends up in Florida, because the Wall, as an unintentional monument, came to define the urban space of Berlin. It was thus an exemplary, if by no means typical, case of a monument giving form to collective identity.

The fate of the Wall since 1989 dramatizes a different link between place and identity, as it is caught in a struggle between destruction, or forgetting, on one hand, and preservation, or the establishment of an intentional monument, on the other. In a sense it is fitting that Berlin’s most famous structure has now been demolished. Berlin is a city associated with destruction, mainly but not exclusively because of the horrors unleashed from here by Hitler. In happier times as well, before and after the Third Reich, Berlin has practiced the destruction that is supposed to bring renewal. Many of the buildings that survived the war did not survive the peace: by the 1960s, preservationists were charging that the “second destruction” of Berlin had exceeded that of the war. And even before the Allied bombers came, Berlin, like New York, had a reputation as a city that quickly consumed its own past, a city of great buildings that no longer exist. Europeans believe—not without reason—that U.S.
cities are showcases of the American practice of planned obsolescence. But whereas New York supposedly casts off the shackles of the past in order to forget them and to live in a dynamic present, Berlin since World War II has ceased to be a city that forgets.

For half a century, Berlin has struggled in vain to purge itself of the ghost of Hitler. At times the will to forget has manifested itself in acts of destruction: when the Soviet authorities quickly leveled Hitler's chancellery after the war, for example, and when the West Berlin government razed SS and Gestapo headquarters. In 1989 a similar fate loomed for the Wall, symbol of the division that came in Hitler's wake. Berlin also offers many examples of the less radical act of forgetting that takes place when new rulers appropriate a building for their own use. In post-Wall Berlin, however, painful memories often impede any smooth disposal of the detritus of history. The desire to forget Hitler or Honecker, the SS or the Stasi, struggles in vain against a determination to remember.

Structures and sites are preserved for all kinds of practical reasons. In some places where the Wall followed a street, and the street has since been reopened, it was simply practical to keep the lights of the death strip as streetlights. This is a decision rich with irony for the few who notice it, but it implies no wish to commemorate the Wall. Similarly, a Toyota dealer who set up shop behind the Reichstag used remnants of the border fortifications to enclose a sales lot—a fascinating snapshot of East Berlin's urban space in transition, but an act devoid of any judgment about the Wall. Preservation becomes an act of remembrance through some further gesture, such as the staging of ceremonies, the establishment of a memorial, or at least the erection of an explanatory or hortatory plaque. In 1945, no one in Germany thought of preserving the memory of most Nazi sites in this way. But after 1989, nearly every proposal to sweep away a relic of the East German state was met with opposition in the form of calls for remembrance. This should not have been a surprise. As we shall see, attitudes toward the Nazi past, and toward Nazi sites, had in the meantime undergone a long and painful transformation. The cumulative effects of two world wars plus a cold war have made German historical memory excruciatingly sensitive, at least in Berlin. Either a Nietzschean paralysis has destroyed the national will to act, or a healthy skepticism has developed about the deeds of nations and human beings, particularly Germans. Although the late-twentieth-century crisis of historical confidence is not unique to Germans, they may lead the world in agonized self-examination.
Notes

One: Berlin Walls

1. Richard von Weizsäcker, quoted in Reinhard Rürup, ed., Topographie des Terrors (Berlin: Arenhövel, 1987), 205. Unless otherwise noted, the translations from German are my own.

2. Wim Wenders, foreword to first version of screenplay for Wings of Desire, reprinted in the publicity materials for the film. I am grateful to Christian Güldenboog for furnishing the citation.


7. This distinction between “intentional” and “unintentional” monuments was first made by the Austrian art historian Alois Riegl in Der moderne Denkmalkultus (1903), translated by Kurt W. Forster and Diane Ghirardo as “The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin,” Oppositions 25 (fall 1982): 21–50.

8. The name meant simply “Checkpoint C” in U.S. armyspeak. The Russian writer Yevgeny Yevtushenko’s assertion—in a poem—that it was “named in honor of a black soldier” is merely proof of a cultural gap that dwarfed the Wall.


17. Ibid., 127–28.


Two: Old Berlin


4. See, for example, Günter Stahn, Das Nikolaiviertel (Berlin: Verlag für Bauwesen, 1991), 52.

5. Quoted in Bodo Rolka and Klaus-Dieter Wille, Das Berliner Stadtschloss (Berlin: Haude und Spener, 1987), 95.


7. Ibid., 194.

8. Ibid., 186.

9. This discussion of the Hohenzollern palace and the Communist palace is confusing enough in any language, but more so in English than in German. In German, the word for a royal palace (Schloss) is entirely distinct from the name the East Germans gave to their parliament building: Palast der Republik. Perhaps this linguistic confusion hampered the proponents of rebuilding the royal palace in their attempt to gain foreign support. Appended to a brochure they issued in 1992 (Förderverein für die Ausstellung, Die Bedeutung des Berliner Stadtschlosses für die Mitte Berlins—Eine Dokumentation [Berlin: Förderverein, 1992]) are numerous letters of support solicited from prominent German scholars and cultural figures. Also included are three letters in English, all from prominent architects. Two of these—from Frank Gehry and Michael Wilford (partner of the late James Stirling)—oppose rebuilding the old palace. In the third, the American architect Robert Venturi comes out firmly against tearing down the royal palace!


23. Michael S. Cullen and Uwe Kieling, Das Brandenburger Tor: Geschichte eines deutschen Symbols (Berlin: Argon, 1990), 108.

