

# Another brick in the wall

The division of Berlin created a cage designed to stop a population fleeing. It was a triumph of East German and Russian ingenuity – but it could not last

*By William Boyd*

I own a 1965 Baedeker guide to Berlin. Like all Baedekers it's superbly detailed, a model of pragmatic advice and scrupulous information. It's also a historical artefact as it was published just four years after the Berlin Wall went up. Here, in precise, neutral commentary, is all you need to know – as a tourist in Berlin – about the Wall and its baleful presence in the city. The four military zones are illustrated with neat diagrams – as if depicting different rooms and floors of a museum – and the beautiful multicoloured fold-out maps of the city's various districts (Kreuzberg, Mitte,

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**Checkpoint Charlie:  
The Cold War, the Berlin Wall and  
the Most Dangerous Place on Earth**

Iain MacGregor

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*Scribner, 352pp, £20*

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Prenzlauer Berg) are all traversed by a cross-hatched, dark grey line: *Die Mauer* – the Wall. According to this edition of Baedeker, the Wall seems as permanent a feature of the city's topography as Berlin's river, the Spree. Of course, history has educated us otherwise.

As the 30-year anniversary of the breaching and demolition of the all approaches, Iain MacGregor's *Checkpoint Charlie* is a fascinating and telling reminder of what was perhaps the most potent symbol of the Cold War. The Wall only stood for 28 years yet it looms large in the collective imagination and memory of those of us old enough to have been around both for its erection and its passing. It seems strange that there is a whole new generation for whom the Berlin Wall is as remote a fragment of recent history as the moon landings of 1969. Even in Berlin today the traces have been

**Picture caption  
on two decks**

almost entirely erased, apart from a few nurtured spots here and there to remind the populace of what once divided them. The famous “Checkpoint Charlie”, one of the crossing points from West to East during the Wall era, is now a much-visited tourist attraction. You can buy the T-shirt – and any amount of souvenir bric-a-brac.

I should declare an interest. My abiding preoccupation with the Berlin Wall arises because I have written a six-hour Cold War spy thriller, currently filming, set in Berlin during the summer months of 1961 before the Wall suddenly went up on 13 August. How I wish I had had MacGregor’s book as a research tool while I was investigating the subject because it was surprisingly hard to find very much – in English, anyway – that dealt with life in pre-Wall Berlin. The Berlin Airlift of 1948-49 is heavily written-up and then there is a curious documentary lacuna before 1961 and the arrival of the Wall. Not any more – MacGregor’s book is, as well as being a history of the Wall, an invaluable scene-setter for the status quo ante.

**B**erlin was the strangest anomaly once the dust had settled on the post-Second World War negotiations and national rearrangements. West Berlin became a small island of capitalism and Western military might in the Communist East. The city was divided into four zones or sectors, occupied by the conquering allies: British, American, French and Russian. There were random checks of documents at crossing points between the sectors but the city was effectively open. The U-Bahn and the S-Bahn trains ran as they had always run. If you wanted to defect from the East you simply caught a train to the West.

West and East Berlin formed a unique frontier some 100 miles away from the real frontier between West Germany and the German Democratic Republic (the GDR). Even though you were deep inside East Germany, if you travelled from East Berlin to West Berlin you had effectively crossed a frontier to freedom in the West. And thereby lay the problem.

In the 1950s the two halves of the city swiftly became very dissimilar. West Berlin was a proximate and alluring emblem of every efficiency, freedom and licence that the West could offer. East Berlin, by contrast, still bore the visible scars of the Russian assault of 1945: bomb sites, shattered buildings, shrapnel damage. Everything was drab and grey and dysfunctional. MacGregor quotes the writer Stefan Heym, who lived in East Berlin:

The people in the East looked towards the West with longing. They would have liked to have had the same comforts, the same goods, the same chances in life. All they could see was a socialist system, which demanded great sacrifice for their efforts and nothing but promises for a better future.

In the decade before 1961, 2.1 million people had left East Germany for the West, most of them via Berlin. This was a sixth of the entire population of the GDR. In July 1961 alone, 30,415 refugees crossed into West Berlin. No state could permit such an exodus and survive. Moreover, these refugees were the best and the brightest of East Germany’s people and 50 per cent were under the age of 25. Everyone in the

coiled barbed-wire entanglements. Berliners looked on in astonishment as workmen, guarded by armed police, closed off streets with barbed wire and boarded up windows. Also looking on were the three armies of the Allied powers – the Americans, the British and the French – who sat back when the Wall was at its most temporary and vulnerable and did nothing. Why?

There is an abiding conspiracy theory that, in actual fact, the dividing of Berlin solved a growing and menacing problem. Nikita Khrushchev and John F Kennedy had met in Vienna in June 1961 trying to solve the Berlin problem and had dramatically failed. Khrushchev yelled at JFK in one encounter: “I want peace, but if you want war, that is your problem!” Berlin, with

## As the Wall went up, looking on were the armies of the Allied powers, who sat back and did nothing. Why?

West realised this flood could not go on forever – but nobody seemed to have any idea what East Germany might, in desperation, do to staunch it. Even when, in June 1961, Walter Ulbricht, the leader of the GDR, made a speech uttering the prescient words, “*Niemand hat die Absicht, eine Mauer zu errichten*” (“No one has the intention of erecting a wall”), the penny did not drop.

In a way, the arrival of the Wall was a paradoxical triumph of East German and Russian ingenuity and a Western intelligence failure. In a matter of a few hours, on a warm and balmy Sunday morning on 13 August, the city was split definitively in two. It was an immense logistical enterprise and the planning was immaculate: the border between East and West Berlin was sealed initially by miles and miles of

its unique tensions, was becoming the cynosure of the Cold War, what Khrushchev called the “most dangerous place on Earth”. The Berlin situation looked as if it were capable of detonating a third world war. The running sore of the East German refugee problem was infecting all East-West dialogue. Stopping it reduced the perilous contagion.

When the Wall arrived the stand-off became, literally, concrete. MacGregor’s history of the post-Wall years is thorough and engaging. With judicious use of interviews with Berliners and other witnesses, he succinctly covers the flare-ups and confrontations, JFK’s famous “*Ich bin ein Berliner*” speech of 1963, the tunnelling operations, the espionage coups and disasters, the symbolic deaths and miraculous escapes of those fleeing to the West, right up to Bruce Springsteen’s seminal East Berlin concert in July 1988 that, with hindsight, signalled the beginning of the end. In 1989 the GDR was a bankrupt state; Russia, under Mikhail Gorbachev, had entered an era of transparency and reform; glasnost and perestroika. The world’s power balance was shifting – the Wall was a totem of a past that everyone wanted to forget.

**A**t the centre of MacGregor’s narrative is Checkpoint Charlie; important because it was the only crossing point in the divided city that could be used by the Allied powers in West Berlin. By another strange anomaly, established by guidelines in the 1945 armistice treaty, ►

**Caption to in here**

► even after the Wall went up Allied occupation forces were allowed free passage into the East. Espionage opportunities were manifold and naturally the tensions never really eased.

By the 1980s the Wall was in its so-called fourth generation state. From the flimsy coils of barbed wire laid in 1961 it had evolved into a massive edifice. It was now, in effect, two walls – the main one facing the West, 3.6 metres high, and behind that another, smaller one facing the citizens of East Berlin. In between were raked-sand killing zones patrolled by Alsatian attack-dogs. Floodlit 24 hours a day, with manned machine-guns on watch-towers every 1,000 metres, it was a potent and daunting obstacle but still, right up to the end of its existence, people risked their lives to cross it. In the final year of the Wall three escapees were killed.

Such desperate attempts signal what was unusual about the Berlin Wall. Unlike most dividing walls – such as Trump’s notional wall on the Mexican border, the Israel-West Bank barrier, Hadrian’s Wall or the Great Wall of China – the Berlin Wall wasn’t designed to keep people out but to keep them in. The 1961 division of Berlin was in fact the creation of a cage designed to stop a population fleeing in search of freedoms denied them in the East. To this extent it was always something of a ticking time-bomb, as the persistent and near-suicidal escape attempts illustrated.

That the end came so swiftly caught everyone by surprise. As the GDR confronted its self-inflicted downfall, a nationwide public media announcement was made confirming that all borders to the country, including the one in Berlin, were now “open”. This is what prompted the mystified, blissful rush on 9 November 1989, when the people of East and West Berlin could meet, pick up their mallets and sledgehammers and physically, individually – with great symbolic force – break down some fragment of the wall that had divided their city.

Iain MacGregor writes with great fluency and narrative drive. A curious side-effect of reading his history is that, as the story steadily unspools, the reader vicariously encounters all the complex gamut of emotions that the Wall itself generated, almost as if you were a witness to the history being enacted: from the shock and consternation of its sudden presence in 1961, to the grim and fatalistic resignation of its endurance through the Sixties and Seventies, to the growing hopes and eventual euphoria of its demise and destruction in 1989. It is a powerful and moving experience. ●

*William Boyd’s Berlin Cold War thriller, “Spy City” will be broadcast next year*



## Worse things happen at sea

The real Wild West lies 12 miles beyond the coastline

By Rose George

**The Outlaw Ocean**

Ian Urbina

Bodley Head, 560pp, £18.99

In late 2013, a fishing resupply vessel pulled up alongside a trawler in the South China Sea. The supply boat carried a worker named Som Nang on his first voyage, who looked over at the trawler with profound shock. On its deck he could see a man who was shackled by the neck and chained to a post. The man was Lang Long. He had been sold for less than the price of a water buffalo and his freedom was later bought by the Catholic seafarers’ welfare charity Stella Maris for \$750. He had been chained on and off for nine months by the captain, for insubordination.

This may be the only physical shackle in Ian Urbina’s book, but there are plenty of other shocks. There are the indentured Cambodians on fishing vessels off Somalia and the children sold for sex in Thai “karaoke bars”, where poor fishermen are also kept so they can run up huge bills and be trafficked on to fishing vessels. There are the rapacious and unscrupulous fishers who fuel an illicit seafood trade that, says Urbina,

creates \$160bn in annual sales (although he also says elsewhere the global black market for seafood is worth \$20bn). Whatever the figure, it is too much. If you want to set forth with Urbina to explore the lawlessness of the ocean, you must be prepared for vastness and depths of all sorts.

The book starts as it means to go on, with drama (the film rights have already been optioned) and the cinematic chase of a “scofflaw” trawler called the *Thunder*, in what is described as “the longest pursuit of an illegal fishing vessel in nautical history”. It is the first of several chases by hunters that include the marine conservation organisation Sea Shepherd – a group of ocean vigilantes in the view of some – Thai, Indonesian and Palauan government patrols; and Greenpeace, which goes after whalers. The vigilantes are needed because of blatantly criminal trawlers such as the *Thunder*. It is a gill-netter, using outlawed nets that create a mesh wall that can stretch several miles across and 20 feet high. *Thunder’s* net was