

THE BERLIN WALL THEN AND NOW



Between 1961 and 1989, the Berlin Wall struck fear into those living on either side of the iron curtain. Its function was similar to that of the Great Wall of China, in keeping people apart from each other, in this case preventing Eastern Germans from fleeing to the capitalist and more prosperous West Germany. After die Wende, the term used for the bringing down of the wall in November 1989, the once-detested symbol of the Cold War and the Communist era has been the centre of tourist activity in Berlin. The brutality of the past and horrors draw plenty of visitors, including a number of artists.

It has been estimated that no less than 125 people died in their attempts to cross the wall to the west, most were shot yet some bled to death as the guards from the numerous watchtowers didn't want to risk walking out into the so-called 90-metre 'death strip'. Such sad stories nowadays lure hundreds of tourists although the wall has a number of enemies including the visitors themselves.

One enemy, of course, is the weather which is gradually eroding the concrete outer layer. Yet the biggest enemy is people. Tourists seem to crave for a piece of the historical structure and often buy suspicious artefacts in Berlin shops; some even steal pieces of the wall. The largest piece ever stolen was near the Potsdamer Platz, yet the most surprising thing is the nonchalance of the Germans in reaction to such theft and their reluctance to preserve the wall at all.

Some artists are trying to preserve the largest 81-mile stretch of the wall, for example Thierry Noir who paints bright tall cartoon faces just metres away from where many were shot. The operation has become known as K stlerinitiative, or 'artists' initiative', as the Berlin Wall begins to appear a lot less gloomy than just a few decades ago.

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