

Beyond Mortar and Bricks

The Symbolic Function of the Berlin Wall



Fig. 1.
*Standing Berlin Wall*¹



Fig. 2.
*Fall of the Berlin Wall*²

Throughout history, civilizations have built walls to create boundaries and to protect against attackers. However, the unique purpose of the Berlin Wall — to prevent the German citizens from traveling freely within their own country — sets the wall apart from other similar structures. Clearly, the Berlin Wall was never simply an object or mere piece of history, but rather functioned as a symbol of oppression. This essay proves this assertion by offering a brief history of the

Berlin Wall, followed by a discussion of the audience reactions and symbolism of the wall. Then, evidence will demonstrate that, while the Berlin Wall was symbolic of oppression as it stood, its destruction also served as a visual argument. In conclusion, this article will compare the Berlin Wall and a present-day wall — the Israeli West-Bank barrier — in order to exemplify how the analysis of the Berlin Wall provides important insight into the function, nature, and symbolism of walls.

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Fig. 3.
*The Construction of the Berlin Wall*⁷

THE HISTORY OF THE BERLIN WALL

To begin, one must consider the history behind the Berlin Wall. Between 1949 and 1961, 2.6 million East Germans attempted to evade the “repressions of the Communist system” by escaping from Soviet-controlled East Germany to West Berlin.³ This population rearrangement posed a serious threat of economic collapse in East Germany. As a result of this threat and mounting Cold War tensions, the East German government decided to prevent migration to West Berlin by constructing the Berlin Wall, “a Wall that divided Berlin for nearly three decades.”⁴ The Communist regime in the German Democratic Republic authorized construction of the Berlin Wall, and the process of assembly, which one can see in Fig.1, began on August 13, 1961.⁵ Stretching along the border between East and West Berlin, the wall was twenty-six miles in length and ranged from 7 to 13 feet high.⁶

The wall was created with “uprooted trees and barbed wire entanglements; wire fencing was erected, road surfaces torn up, ditches dug and so on.”⁸ Railroads between the East and West were destroyed during the construction of the Berlin Wall, and “windows facing towards the border were

barricaded or bricked up so as not to serve for escape purposes.”⁹ Clearly, the presence of the Berlin wall altered life for German citizens, depriving people of their ability to move freely in their own nation.

AUDIENCE INTERPRETATION OF THE BERLIN WALL

Although the Soviets constructed the Berlin Wall in an attempt to prevent the impending economic collapse in East Germany, the effects of the structure caused the wall’s audiences, including East and West Berliners and Americans, to view the Berlin Wall as a symbol for a number of different ideas. These viewpoints are reflections of the different “terministic screens,” held by each audience member, that filtered or shaped the way that people viewed the Berlin Wall. Kenneth Burke describes the role of terministic screens when he states, “Even if any given terminology is a reflection of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a selection of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a deflection of reality.”¹⁰ Each Berlin Wall audience held terministic screens formed by past experiences surrounding Berlin’s political state, mounted Cold War tensions, and the creation

of the wall. These terministic screens greatly shaped the way that each audience viewed the Berlin Wall.

Two main audiences of the Berlin Wall included citizens of East and West Germany. Although the Communist regime in the German Democratic Republic instigated the erection of the Berlin Wall, the structure affected the lives of the citizens of both sides of the wall.¹¹ The Soviets forcibly evicted many people living near the wall, and a large number of citizens from both East and West Berlin had family members located on opposing sides of the wall.¹² Aside from abolishing travel and dividing families, however, one of the most dramatic effects of the wall was the “lost opportunity of exchanging life in the GDR [German Democratic Republic] for life in the Federal Republic. The denial of this opportunity, it has been observed, depresses morale... resulting in resignation and desperation.”¹³ Thus, the Berlin Wall acted as a symbol of oppression for both East Germans and West Berliners for twenty-eight years until the fall of the Berlin Wall occurred on November 9, 1989.

A second audience of the Berlin Wall includes Americans. Ronald Reagan’s speech, “Tear Down This Wall,” demonstrates how the views of this American audience greatly contrast with the German audience feelings toward the Berlin Wall. Delivered in West Berlin on June 12, 1987, Reagan’s speech reflects the symbolic meaning of the Berlin Wall, as depicted by the American audience. The line ‘tear down this wall’ in Reagan’s speech “has been treated as a wonderful applause line, which it certainly was, but it was more than that.”¹⁴ The line is a symbolic expression of the need to end the oppression of Berliners. Reagan’s speech depicts “the courage and determination of the citizens of Berlin, people with whom America and the rest of the world share common in-

terests,” while demonstrating the fact that, like the citizens of Berlin, America also saw the necessity of tearing down the wall.¹⁵ In his speech, “by embracing both principled ideological and moral opposition to the Soviets and in other contexts a pragmatic viewpoint, Reagan was able to take a strong moral position in opposition to tyranny, but also to lessen the risk of conflict and set the stage for successful negotiation between the two nations.”¹⁶ In contrast to Berliners, Americans did not experience the direct effects of living in a city divided by the Berlin Wall; however, it is apparent that much of the world viewed the standing Berlin Wall as a symbol of the Cold War and of the oppression of Berliners. Because the Cold War was largely a post-World War II economic political struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union, America supported and encouraged removal of the Berlin Wall. Reagan’s speech clearly reflects these post-World War II American goals and ideas, while providing insight into the reaction and mindset of the American audience, regarding the Berlin Wall.

THE SYMBOLISM OF THE BERLIN WALL

After examining the history behind the Berlin Wall, as well as the reactions of the wall’s audiences, it is necessary to determine exactly what significance the structure holds. To begin, in order to understand why civilizations create walls, such as the one in Berlin, one must examine the fundamental nature of humans. In places where there are no natural boundaries, humans often have the tendency to “impose boundaries — marking off territory so that it has an inside and a bounding surface — whether a wall, a fence, or an abstract line or plane. There are few human instincts more basic than territoriality. And such defining of a territory, putting a boundary

around it, is an act of quantification.”¹⁶ It is clear that the East German government’s creation of the Berlin Wall is a reflection of this basic human instinct to create boundaries. The implementation of the Berlin Wall created a barrier that contained the German citizens within either the East or West by physically constraining travel.

However, just as Lakoff and Johnson claim it is human nature to create walls, it is also the nature of humans to resist the constraints such boundaries impose. This is likely because people see these boundaries not just as structures, but rather as symbols for larger ideas. For example, after the construction of the Berlin Wall, it became apparent that the symbolism of the structure made the wall “a state of mind as much as... a physical structure.”¹⁷ Supporting this argument is the fact that while the Berlin Wall stood, “East Germans were prohibited from mentioning the term ‘wall’.. The preferred term was the ‘anti-fascist protection bulwark.’”¹⁹ The East German government knew that the citizens would be hostile to the idea of the Berlin Wall; as a result, the government restricted the language that citizens could use to refer to the structure in an attempt to prevent backlash of angry Berliners. By creating a new label for the structure, the East German government was attempting to change the symbolic meaning of the Berlin Wall for the German people. The term ‘anti-fascist protection bulwark’ is a euphemism for ‘wall,’ intended to lessen the sense that the government was using the structure to oppress the German citizens. However, “the presence of the wall was, nevertheless, a dominating feature.”²⁰

Furthermore, studies have shown that there are many “deleterious social and psychological consequences of a society encircled by a wall” including “a novel psychological disease: ‘the wall disorder.’”²¹ This disorder refers to

how “the feeling of ‘being locked up,’ in addition to wall-induced separation and social isolation from friends and family, could produce various psychological disorders such as psychosis, schizophrenia, and behavioral problems including alcoholism, depression, anger, dependency, dejection, and suicide.”²² Even after the wall fell, “psychologists and psychoanalysts maintained that the wall reappeared as ‘die Mauer in den Köpfen’ or ‘the wall in the heads’ of the German people.”²³ These assertions reflect the idea that, aside from its physical imposition, the Berlin Wall also affected the psychological make-up of many Germans who lived with the wall. Evidently, the Berlin Wall is not merely a physical structure, but rather is symbolic of a number of ideas and emotions that caused conflict in the minds of the German people.

Analysis of the Berlin Wall as a visual argument furthers the idea that the structure is not just a cement obstruction, but a symbol of the control and oppression of the German people. According to Sonja Foss, “to qualify as visual rhetoric, an image must go beyond serving as a sign, however, and be symbolic, with that image only indirectly connected to its referent.”²⁴ The function of the Berlin Wall exemplifies this idea, extending beyond serving as a sign. Despite the fact that the East German government erected the Berlin Wall in an attempt to salvage the economic and political situation in Germany, the German citizens interpreted the structure as the government’s attempt to symbolically demonstrate its power. In support of this German mindset, it is interesting to recognize that “the great walls of the past were erected to repel invaders and barbarians. The Wall in Berlin is unique because its object is to prevent the men and women behind it from reaching freedom.”²⁵ While the Great Wall of China protected Chinese



Fig. 4. Berliners celebrate the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.²⁷

dynasties from the attacks of nomadic tribes and Hadrian's Wall prevented the Roman Empire from raids by tribes in current-day Scotland, the East German Government established the Berlin Wall to prevent travel of citizens within their own nation. Armed East German border guards lined the Berlin Wall to prevent people from crossing from one side of the wall to the other. During the twenty-eight years that the wall stood, "over 40, 000 people tried to cross illegally, and 95 died while attempting to do so."²⁶ The large number of killings — both provoked and unprovoked — over the twenty-eight years that the wall stood empirically demonstrate the atmosphere of fear the wall created.

DEFIANCE OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Aside from creating an ambiance of fear, the imposition of the Berlin Wall actually defied human rights. The Congress for Cultural Freedom, consisting of "thirty authors of world re-

pute," signed a declaration on August 29, 1961, that stated, "It is one thing for a social order to force its citizens, by the millions, to seek asylum elsewhere. It is still more reprehensible to cut off their escape by means of walls and barbed wire across city streets, to threaten them at the point of bayonets, to shoot at them in flight as if they were runaway slaves."²⁸ The Congress for Cultural Freedom continued their assertion by describing how the Berlin Wall defies "the most elementary respect for a human right — and one which all the nations of the civilized world are on record as having recognized."²⁹ According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, created by the General Assembly of the United Nations, "Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own."³⁰ The Berlin Wall violates this basic human right in two ways: by physically acting as a barrier preventing travel and by imposing psychological barriers upon the minds of the German citizens. It is apparent that "the Wall that prevent[ed] the citizens of the GDR [German Dem-

ocratic Republic] and East Berlin from choosing freedom [could] not conceal the injustice perpetrated behind it. Its construction through the heart of the city [had] neither legal nor moral justification.”³¹ Thus, the Berlin Wall stood as a symbol of oppression by depriving German citizens of their basic human rights.

THE FALL OF THE WALL AND THE OVERTHROW OF A SYMBOL

While the Berlin Wall was symbolic of oppression as it stood, its demolition also served as a visual argument. The “fall of the Berlin Wall” occurred on November 9, 1989. From this day forth, Berliners could travel across the border created by the wall. At this time, the wall was not physically torn down, but “a new law to lift the travel restrictions for East German citizens” was established.³² The true power of the Berlin Wall as a visual argument became evident when the government announced the fall of the wall and crowds screamed and cheered loudly, celebrating the end of the oppression embodied by the Berlin Wall (as seen in Fig. 2).

On the day that the destruction of the wall’s physical form began, the structure lost its ability to impose movement restrictions on the German people; consequently, the message of the Berlin Wall as a symbol of oppression ended. Ronald Reagan demonstrates this symbolic function of the fall of the Berlin Wall in his speech, “Tear Down This Wall,” when he states:

*“...as long as the gate is closed, as long as this scar of a wall is permitted to stand, it is not the German question alone that remains open, but the question of freedom for all mankind. Yet I do not come here to lament. For I find in Berlin a message of hope, even in the shadow of this wall, a message of triumph.”*³³

Reagan emphasizes this symbolic nature of the Berlin Wall when he asserts:

*“As I looked out a moment ago from the Reichstag, that embodiment of German unity, I noticed words crudely spray-painted upon the wall, perhaps by a young Berliner: ‘This wall will fall. Beliefs become reality.’ Yes, across Europe, this wall will fall. For it cannot withstand faith; it cannot withstand freedom.”*³⁴

Clearly, Reagan understands the symbolic nature of the Berlin Wall, and calls to overthrow the symbol of oppression in his speech, challenging, “General Secretary Gorbachev, if you seek prosperity for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, if you seek liberation: Come here to this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!”³⁵ Two years after Reagan’s speech, the wall fell and the symbol of oppression and of the Cold War was overthrown.

CONCLUSIONS

Clearly, the Berlin Wall acted as a symbol of oppression as it stood and portrayed a message of freedom when dismantled. Analysis of the Berlin Wall provides valuable insight into the nature and effects of walls, which one can apply to similar present-day structures. For instance, consider the role of a controversial wall in the status quo: The Israeli West-Bank barrier. In 2005, an Israeli court ruled that the country should have the “authority to build a separation wall in the West Bank, beyond Israel’s internationally recognized 1967 borders, for security reasons, signaling that Israel would continue to build the barrier despite Palestinian and international objections.”³⁶ However, in order to gain more access to major West Bank cities, Palestinian villages appealed this decision, and as a result, Israeli justices decided to rethink the proposed

plan for the wall.³⁷ The fact that the Israeli government took into consideration the lives of the people that the wall would affect before erecting the structure contrasts with the unilateral decision of the East German government to construct a wall dividing Berlin. The goals of the Israeli West-Bank wall — to prevent attacks, solve political unrest, and salvage the economy in the area — are similar to some extent to the functions of the Berlin Wall, which served to prevent possible economic collapse and salvage the political situation at the time. Although governments created both the Berlin Wall and the Israeli West-Bank wall to rectify political and economic problems, the two walls became symbols of control and oppression for certain audiences. In Berlin, the wall restricted travel, split families, and inflicted fear upon those who lived near the structure. Similarly, people who oppose the Israeli West-Bank barrier feel that the wall will restrict travel for Palestinians who live in the West Bank and work in Israel. However, although the intentions for both walls might be similar, it is clear that the creation of the Israeli West-Bank wall is more justified because it is necessary for security purposes, whereas the implementation of the Berlin Wall is widely accepted

to be a violation of the human rights of German citizens. While the Berlin Wall functioned as a symbol of oppression, the Israeli West-Bank wall stands as a symbol or reminder of the need to resolve the political unrest in the Israel/West Bank area. Thus, when the Israeli West-Bank barrier is torn down, the dismantling will symbolize the rectification of political problems and the achievement of newfound freedom and peace. In the case of each of the two walls in Berlin and Israel/West Bank it is clear that the building of walls serves as a visual way to assert larger issues of politics, economics, safety, and control.

In conclusion, the history, audience reaction, and role in creating an atmosphere of fear offer important insight into the symbolic nature of the Berlin Wall. By relating the analysis of the Wall in Berlin to the Israeli West-Bank wall, it is clear that the Berlin Wall redefines the significance of walls. Thus, what purpose does a wall hold? Before examining the Berlin Wall, one might have asserted that walls function to contain, block, or guard. While these things are true, the analysis of the Berlin Wall points to a higher purpose of walls: to visually symbolize larger ideas of political control, loss of rights, and oppression.

END NOTES

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