THE BERLIN WALL

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BLOOMSBURY

17

ENDGAME

THE VERY FIRST AND very last victims of the Berlin Wall died by falling: the first in August 1961 after a desperate plunge from a window high on a block in the Bernauer Strasse; and the last in March 1989 when a home-made balloon crashed to the ground in the West Berlin suburbs, inflicting fatal injuries upon the man travelling in the basket beneath. The balloon's pilot and builder was a young East German who had planned to sail over the by now impregnable Wall. He actually succeeded, but almost immediately ran into bad luck, in the shape of a power line on the Western side. Had his wife not lost her nerve in the last moments before take-off, she and their small child would have perished with him.

It might be said that one died because at the beginning the jump to the West seemed fatally easy; the other because at the end of the Wall's life it seemed so terribly difficult.

And the Wall felt so permanent, to all but a few.

On 1 December 1978, *Stasi* observers at the border-crossing complex facing Checkpoint Charlie observed unusual activity on the Western side. An unknown man and a woman were being filmed by a TV crew outside the US army's checkpoint shack. When the filming finished, at 10.40, it was reported that they left the area. However, about four hours later they returned in a black Plymouth sedan with US Mission licence plates. An army sergeant drove them through the checkpoint and into East Berlin.

Only when they presented their passports were the couple in the back of the Plymouth identified as two Americans, a man of sixty-seven and a woman ten years younger. Their names were Ronald and Nancy Reagan.

The Reagans took an hour's drive around East Berlin, like any tourists, and then returned to the West. The East German authorities had for the

first time laid eyes on the man who, many say, would prove to be the nemesis of their regime and all it represented. However, the *Stasi* observers do not, at that point, even seem to have realised who the man and his wife were.[1] This would change very soon.

The former governor of California and soon Republican candidate for the presidency would present a great challenge to the East. However, there was another challenge present that had already been there for several years but whose significance grew quietly, almost stealthily.

This one came in the form of a piece of paper, a document known as the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe, also known as the Helsinki Accord. The section dealing with human rights read in part:

> The participating States will respect fully human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, for all without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion.
>
> They will promote and encourage the effective exercise of civil, political, economic, social, cultural and other rights and freedoms all of which derive from the inherent dignity of the human person and are essential for his free and full development.

Other clauses dealt specifically with promoting freedom of movement and of thought, and the reunification of families.

This ringing declaration was signed on 1 August 1975, after two years of negotiations, by the representatives of thirty-five nations from East and West, including the German Federal Republic and the German Democratic Republic. At the signing ceremony in the Finnish capital, Erich Honecker sat proudly between Chancellor Helmut Schmidt of West Germany and President Gerald Ford of the United States. Honecker was a legitimate, recognised international figure, and the GDR no longer a pariah regime.

There is a price for everything. The East German leadership, expert practitioners of *realpolitik*, none the less did not seem to suspect that what they had signed went against almost every practice of their regime, and most spectacularly against the atrocity that was their fortified Wall through the middle of Berlin.

Ordinary East Germans were, not for the first time, quicker on the uptake. On 10 July 1976, a 46-year-old doctor from the town of Riesa in Saxony, Karl-Heinz Nitschke, composed a 'Petition for the full attainment of human rights'. Referring to the Helsinki document, he and thirty-three other GDR citizens signed this petition with full names and addresses, demanding from the government that it comply with the treaty's guaranteed 'right to free choice of place of work and residence' and allow them to travel freely to the West. They delivered this petition to the State Council of the GDR, to the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva and to the Western media.

Other citizens from the area around Riesa and Karl-Marx-Stadt (Chemnitz) soon gave their support to the document. Many were arrested by the *Stasi* and sentenced under the catch-all laws forbidding 'anti-state agitation' and 'anti-state connections'. Nitschke himself was imprisoned and interrogated over a period of two years until August 1977, when he was bought out by the West German authorities.

Far from discouraging the emigration movement, Nitschke's case acted as a spur. Collective applications for exit visas became more common, especially in the early 1980s. Western organisations such as 'Helsinki Watch' (which later changed its name to Human Rights Watch) publicised the persecution of such people. In 1984 East German citizens demanding the right to travel outside the GDR occupied Western embassies in East Berlin.

The regime responded by setting up special units of the *Stasi* whose purpose was to discourage citizens from applying to leave. Pressure was put on individuals at their places of work or study. Persistent appliers were pulled in for interrogation and on occasion charged with treasonable acts, which in East Germany were extremely broadly defined. Faced with more subtle forms of protest such as silent vigils, symbolic white ribbons on cars, and so on, the regime responded with subtle strategies of its own. The *Stasi* infiltrated dissident groups with agents whose job was to spread division and act as *provocateurs*, urging protesters into extreme actions that would give the state an excuse to intervene and inflict exemplary punishments.

This penetration exercise was particularly vigorous in the case of the churches in East Germany. Christian organisations had suffered con-

siderably under Ulbricht, a lifelong anti-religious militant, but Honecker realised that the predominantly Protestant churches were becoming a refuge for dissidents, from punks to pacifists.

Something had to be done. Unwilling to crush the evangelical movement in the old, ruthless Stalinist style – Helsinki lingered uncomfortably in the background of the decision-making process – in March 1978 Honecker called a meeting with church leaders. He praised the churches' contribution to peace and their role as a 'positive social factor', and offered what amounted to a concordat. The state would tolerate free expression of religion in print and broadcast as well as in churches, and grant state aid to institutions such as senior citizens' homes and religious cemeteries. Priests would be permitted to make visits to prisoners in state jails. In return, the church leaders would be expected to exercise control over their flocks.

For a while, this seemed to succeed. But many young East Germans – the generation born since 1940, who were far more 'Ulbricht's children' than Hitler's – were attracted to the Protestant churches. Most had pleaded pacifism when called up for the NVA and been assigned as non-combatant 'construction soldiers' (*Bausoldaten*). This classification excused them from armed service but at the same time showed that they were not 'loyal', excluding them from careers in medicine, the law, or the universities once they returned to civilian life. To these young people, the church was a free, protected place, where modest careers could be made without kowtowing to the Communist state.

Rainer Eppelmann, a leading dissident, spoke for many who had grown up in the shadow of the Wall when he admitted that he joined the church from practical rather than merely religious considerations:

> I asked myself, what can you become, for a contented or even a happy life in this country? The only answer which occurred to me was: pastor . . . It was clear to me that only the study of theology was able to offer me a little mental freedom.[2]

A parallel 'alternative scene' arose in East Germany in the 1970s and 1980s. Intelligent, critically minded young people could not engage with society through the conventional channels, and so they founded

their own subcultures and settled into niches within these groups. They made the best of things.

Matthias Neutzner, born in Saxony the year before the Wall was built, wanted to study aeronautical engineering, but because his elder brother had escaped to the West he was marked out as politically unreliable. This meant that Matthias was banned from working in the aeronautics industry – this would have given him access to aircraft, and aircraft can be flown over borders. As a consequence, he went into the fledgeling East German computer industry, which was being energetically promoted in the late 1970s and early 1980s as part of attempts to broaden the country's industrial base. Neutzner learned to program and to handle databases.

By the 1980s, Matthias he and his friends were in-demand experts, called on by hard-pressed state managers to solve logistical and supply problems by the magic of screen and keyboard. Their special niche was the GDR's cut-flower distribution network, a large part of which relied on their computer programming. This earned them decent money, made them largely independent of the state, and enabled them to take part in dissident activity. A strong pacifist, Neutzner could also find time to pursue his interest in recording the oral history of the Allied bombing of German cities through interviews with survivors. In the system of 'favours', of virtual barter, that pertained towards the end of the regime's life, his contacts often supplied him with, say, the use of a van or truck in exchange for computer work. East Germans made life a little more bearable through this unofficial 'black' economy. It enabled the exchange of goods and services away from the state's rigid, grasping hand. The fact was, even the government did the same. Think of KoKo.

Although Neutzner never applied to leave, there was a growing wave of exit-visa applications in the early 1980s. This motivated the regime's mass-issue of permits in the first months of 1984, a gesture supposed to please its Western political and banker friends while at the same time taking some of the pressure off the exit-visa movement. It may have succeeded in the former aim, but not the latter. The demand just kept growing. The *Stasi* could keep the dissident movement divided, and it could decapitate its leadership, but the exit-visa movement was something else, something close to a force of nature – a monster that the

Helsinki agreement had summoned from the depths of the East German people's unconsciousness.

And just a little more than two years after the *Stasi* had spotted him and his wife posing for the cameras in front of Checkpoint Charlie, on 20 January 1981 Ronald Wilson Reagan was sworn in as fortieth president of the United States.

President Reagan's incoming Republican administration offered little direct threat to the East German regime as such.

What it did represent was a kind of ruthless counter-revolutionary conviction that shocked and shook the Communist world. Backing the right-wing Contras against Marxist Sandanistas in Central America and the mujahidin against the Soviets and their client regime in Afghanistan, the Americans dared to mimic the kind of support for 'national liberation' movements that the Soviets had aggressively promoted since the 1950s. Twenty years before, the urbane Harold Macmillan saw himself as moderating America's alleged tendency towards extremes – Britain's classically educated Prime Minister liked to see his nation as wise, educated 'Greeks' to the primitive, power-orientated 'Romans' of the USA. Twenty years later, Reagan was backed to the hilt, and beyond, by his British counterpart, the no less uncompromisingly anti-Communist and pro-capitalist Margaret Thatcher.

If the Helsinki Accord amounted to the 'soft cop' working on the Eastern Bloc's contradictions – talking democracy while walking dictatorship was always a latent problem for Communist regimes – then the Reagan administration was the 'hard cop', confronting the Communist world on the most direct of levels.

In the late 1970s, the Russians introduced the SS-20 intermediate nuclear missile, with a range of about 2,700 miles. Though stationed on Soviet soil, it gave them the ability to hit targets as far away as Portugal in the west and Japan in the east. The Americans responded with the Pershing II missile, which had less than half the range but was much more accurate. Towards the end of his time in office, the Democratic President Carter had made preparations to bring Pershing into service, but at the same time, in the hope of keeping détente alive, he signed the complex and problematic SALT II arms-reduction treaty.

Then, on Christmas Day 1979, came the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Carter, who had begun his presidency as an apostle of détente, now put the SALT treaty on ice, asked for an expansion in the military budget, and introduced sanctions against the Eastern Bloc, involving curbs on grain and technology exports. America would also boycott the Moscow Olympic Games, due in the summer of 1980.

Reagan therefore became president in January 1981 at a time when the Cold War temperature had already dipped considerably. He continued Carter's plan to station a new generation of intermediate-range missiles in Western Europe, planned even bigger military-budget increases, and – last but not least – introduced a level of anti-Communist rhetoric not heard since the early 1960s. This gave his decisions (which may not have differed much from the ones that Carter would have made if re-elected) an extra 'bite' that was surprisingly significant on a world-historical scale.

Reagan told an audience at Notre Dame University, Indiana, on 17 May 1981, in a speech delivered with a president's gravity and an actor's flair: 'The West won't contain Communism, it will transcend Communism. It won't bother to dismiss or denounce it, it will dismiss it as some bizarre chapter in human history whose last pages are even now being written.'

The echo, conscious or otherwise, was of Khrushchev's notorious 'we shall bury you' speech from 1956. Khrushchev's remarks, though not so aggresively meant as some thought at the time, did indicate a new sense of self-confidence. A quarter of a century later, Reagan's words were intended to convey the same.

There followed a period of nervous stand-off. The Pershings and 'cruise' missiles were introduced into Western Europe, despite protests throughout the continent. Then in 1983 Reagan pulled what many still regard as a stroke of genius. He announced his intention to break the stalemate of 'mutually assured destruction' by developing a futuristic anti-missile system capable of preventing Soviet warheads from reaching American soil. This idea seemed to come straight from a Hollywood sci-fi epic (much talk of laser beams) and became known as the 'Star Wars' project.

In Moscow, Reagan's announcement caused something approaching panic and, as the conviction strengthened that perhaps the Americans could carry out their threat, a steady sense of demoralisation. Soviet air

defences were placed on full alert. The atmosphere grew so jittery that when, in September, a South Korean civilian airliner strayed into Soviet airspace over the Far East region, it was shot down – on direct orders from Moscow.[3]

Leonid Brezhnev, Khrushchev's successor as Soviet leader, died a few weeks short of his seventy-sixth birthday in November 1982, after eighteen years in power. He was succeeded by KGB boss Yuri Andropov. Andropov lasted only sixteen months in office before succumbing to a kidney disease, aged sixty-nine, in February 1984, giving way to an older man in the shape of 72-year-old Konstantin Chernenko. Chernenko, a conservative figure already in poor health, lasted a mere thirteen months.

During his first term, Reagan – himself moving into his seventies – faced weak and ailing Soviet leaders. In 1982 his aggressive international stance was boosted by the collapse of the 'social-liberal' coalition in West Germany and the replacement of Social Democrat Helmut Schmidt with Helmut Kohl. Throughout the 1980s, three of the four major powers in NATO were ruled by right-wingers. And a conservative theologian from the Eastern Bloc, the Pole Andrei Karol Józef Wojtyła, was elected leader of the Roman Catholic Church as Pope John Paul II.

The strange thing was that during this period, when the hesitant détente of the late 1970s was abandoned and the Soviet Union and the USA reverted to a confrontational stance, relations between the two German states were not seriously affected. Rather the contrary.

True, the stationing of Pershing missiles on West German soil gave occasion for a vicious little propaganda skirmish. None the less, even after the conservative Kohl's election as chancellor in the West, Honecker enjoyed a standing invitation to visit Bonn. Only a Soviet veto prevented him from doing so in the autumn of 1984. The Moscow leadership summoned Honecker to the Kremlin in August and forced him to cancel his planned trip.[4] There was clear concern on the Soviets' part that East Germany was becoming too dependent on West German credits and payments. And what is more, in their unease the Soviets were absolutely right.

One younger member of the Soviet Politburo who had voted against allowing Honecker to visit West Germany was 54-year-old Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev, Second Secretary of the CPSU. In 1985, after Chernenko died, he was elected First Secretary and *de facto* leader of the

USSR by colleagues tired of gerontocracy as a system of government. The first leader of Communist Russia to be born after the 1917 revolution, Gorbachev preached reform expressed through the principles of *glasnost* or 'openness', *perestroika* ('restructuring') and *uskoreniye* ('acceleration').

This amounted to an overdue admission in the heartland of Communism that something was very wrong with the system – and had been for a long time. In East Germany, however, the old men were still firmly in command. Despite the scramble for Western credits and the steady pressure from the exit-visa movement, the pretence remained that the GDR was the best of all Germanys in the best of all possible worlds.

In reality, East Germany was by now frighteningly uncompetitive outside the Soviet Bloc. Thuringia and Saxony especially had always been in the forefront of the industrial and technological revolution, from the early nineteenth century until the time of the Third Reich. Bomb damage, sequestering of plant and machinery by the Soviets for reparations, heavy-handed socialisation of industry, and the subsequent loss of expert management, capital, patents and skilled workers to the West, had weakened the country's economic fundamentals.

Before the First World War, Saxony, along with neighbouring Bohemia (now the Czech Republic), enjoyed the highest real net output in Europe. Chemnitz, with a population of 400,000, was known as the 'Manchester of Germany'. Until the collapse of the Third Reich, Dresden, with its camera and typewriter factories and electronics workshops, was the second-fastest-growing city after Berlin. Leipzig, Magdeburg, Halle and Jena were booming manufacturing centres

In 1939, industrial production per head in the region that would a decade later become the GDR amounted to 725 Reichsmarks per year. In the territories that would become West Germany, production per head was only 609 Reichsmarks.[5]

Take one example, the Saxon metropolis of Leipzig. After 1945, most of the publishing industry, the tobacco industry, the printing industry (including Gisecke & Devrient, the largest banknote printer in the world), all huge employers, left Leipzig for the West. The same went for the German bibliographical and copyright library, which transferred to Frankfurt-on-Main, as did the German Football Association.

The senior management at Zeiss emigrated from Jena and Dresden to

the West in the aftermath of war. Although optics and camera works continued in operation in the GDR, and did quite well by comparison with other industries, the world-wide resurgence of the brand after the war was based on new, modern factories near Stuttgart. Wella, an international market leader in the hair-care, cosmetics and perfume business, founded in Rothenkirchen in Saxony in 1880, relocated to Darmstadt, in the American Zone of West Germany. The East Berlin brake-system manufacturer, Knorr-Bremse, moved to Munich. The examples go on and on.

In West Germany, the creativity and energy of an industrious, educated population, kick-started by the Marshall Plan and bolstered by rapid transfers of human and physical capital from the East, produced the famous 'economic miracle'. The East, which should have been even more advantaged, never really recovered under the bureaucratic, centrally directed command structure that remained, for all the talk of 'new courses' and so on, the basis of the GDR's economy.

'Never before in the two-hundred-year industrial history of Germany,' wrote an expert economist, 'probably never before in the industrial history of the entire world, has there been such a powerful transfer of technology, a transfer from the East to the West'.[6]

Despite this, with West Germany tapped successfully for credits, with relatively favourable terms of trade with the Eastern Bloc and parts of the Third World, and despite raw-materials and energy problems and mounting deficits, the GDR maintained a façade of success. As the East German state approached its fortieth anniversary, it appeared to many unsuspecting outsiders to represent a confident, progressive and egalitarian alternative to grasping, high-stress Western capitalism.

These people did not see – perhaps did not want to see – the polluted cities and shabby buildings, and nor did they experience the sudden, unexplained and often bizarre shortages, or the bureaucratic delays and petty restrictions that marred the life of the average East German citizen. They also did not get to compare the pampered lives of the ageing Communist *apparatchiks* in Wandlitz with those of their subjects.

Almost no one suspected that the GDR was approaching its doom. That the writing was, almost literally, on the Wall.

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In September 1987, Erich Honecker achieved the ambition he had been harbouring for the past five years. He made a state visit to West Germany.

Finally, the GDR – and Honecker – could feel themselves on equal terms with their bigger, more prosperous neighbour.

The behind-the-scenes preparations for the visit had not been easy. The refugee organisations were outraged at such an invitation to the 'tyrant' and 'Soviet satrap' Honecker, and many on the respectable Right in West Germany also expressed doubts. There were attempts to avoid a reception by the West German President, and to keep Honecker away from Bonn, but finally the West Germans capitulated.

Honecker was received with dignity, politeness and even friendliness. None the less, in various subtle ways the West Germans managed to make it clear that to them he was still not quite a foreign dignitary and the GDR still not quite a foreign land. The trip was described officially not as a state visit but as a 'working visit'. Ex-Chancellor Willy Brandt described the curious refinements of protocol affecting Honecker's reception:

> Half amused, half amazed, I watched how the GDR's Chairman of the State Council was received in front of the Chancellery with a gently lowered level of ceremony: the honour guard was a bit smaller; it was led not by its commander but by his deputy; only anthems, not national anthems were played.[7]

Only seven motorcycle outriders escorted Honecker's limousine on the drive through Bonn, and the foreign diplomatic corps was not invited to the state dinner and to the receptions, to show that this was not an *'international' event.*[8]

Nor did Chancellor Kohl mince his words on the principled question of reunification. At an occasion that was also beamed into East German homes, Kohl spoke of the right of the German people to 'complete the unity and freedom of Germany in free self-determination'. Honecker could only retort that the relations between East and West Germany were 'marked by the realities of this world', and – the old Communist showing his mettle – that 'socialism and capitalism can no more be united than

fire and water'. It could not have failed to strike any viewer – and is clear from photographs of the encounter – that Honecker was a lot shorter and slighter than the enormous Chancellor Kohl, who at almost six feet four inches tall and weighing around 280 pounds, towered over him. To see in this juxtaposition a metaphor for 'big Germany' and 'little Germany' was inescapable.

In a way, it must have been a relief for Honecker to escape the treacherous hierarchies and invidious comparisons of Bonn and set off on his tour of the provinces. He was received in Düsseldorf, capital of the Ruhr industrial area that was the foundation of West Germany's industrial might. He visited Trier, where Karl Marx was born, and Wuppertal-Barmen, where the co-founder of Communism, Friedrich Engels, had been brought up in the first decades of the nineteenth century as the son of a wealthy textile manufacturer. Honecker was even fêted at the splendid Villa Hügel in Essen, former residence of the Krupp family. This was the symbol of German capitalism at its most successful – and politically corrupt.

But the moment that briefly provided a glimpse into Erich Honecker, the human being, was his short but intensely felt trip to his home town, Wiebelskirchen in the Saarland, so far west that the French border lay just a short drive away. On arrival, he visited his sister, who still lived in the family house, and paid respects to his parents' grave in the local cemetery. The powerful leader's eyes moistened as he heard the miners' choirs sing the songs of his youth. He chatted with pleasure in the distinctive dialect of his homeland. There were boos, and cries from the crowd of 'murderer', a handful of hostile or sarcastic placards, but on the whole the Saar greeted its long-lost son with a certain perverse approval. Its provincial premier, leftist SPD politician Oskar Lafontaine, told Honecker that 'people around here feel a certain satisfaction, even a certain pride, when they see a born Saarlander ruling over the Prussians and the Saxons'.[9]

So overcome with emotion was Honecker that in his final speech he for the first time strayed from his prepared text. The situation was, he said, that there were two Germanys, anchored in two power blocs, and that – here came the surprise – as a result, understandably, 'the borders are not as they should be'. One day, he added, it might be that 'the borders will no longer divide us, but unite us'.

The journalists went crazy. So did the Soviets. Honecker's speech was broadcast live in East Germany. Within minutes of the transmission, the Soviet ambassador was on the telephone to the Politburo's man in charge of security, Egon Krenz, who at fifty-two was reckoned Honecker's probable successor. Moscow was not pleased. It might be that if you looked at Honecker's speech carefully, it gave nothing away – but to use the word 'unity' in any context at all was very dangerous.

By the time Honecker arrived in Munich, for the last stop of his tour, he had recovered his composure. Bizarrely, the most powerful Communist in Germany was fêted in the capital of German conservatism by the Bavarian premier, Franz Josef Strauss, who had helped to arrange the vital credits five years before. As a mark of Bavaria's long tradition of autonomy, the band played three national anthems at the reception – the West German, the East German, and the Bavarian. And Honecker had a full compliment of motorcycle outriders.

Within days of his return to East Berlin, Erich Honecker delivered a lengthy and triumphal report for his Politburo colleagues. It stretched to 170 pages. The document boasted that his visit was 'of far-reaching effect and historical importance', clear proof of the independence and sovereignty of the GDR. The West Germans had been constrained to 'treat Comrade Erich Honecker as head of state of another sovereign state . . . documenting, for all the world to see, the independence and equality of the two German states . . .'[10]

Meanwhile, the *Stasi* carried out one of its surveys of popular opinion inside East Germany, with special reference to Honecker's visit to the West. 'Progressive citizens', it said, considered that the visit had proved the GDR's sovereign status. However, among young people, the view was that it 'signalled the obsolescence of the Berlin Wall and of the traditional negative image of West German imperialism'.[11]

Honecker had got off lightly in his visit to West Germany. Apart from Kohl's reference to German self-determination, and a few small demonstrations along the way, the East German leader could and did consider the trip a PR success.

Of course, it changed nothing. The GDR was still in bad financial trouble, and relations with Moscow under the new, reformist leadership

were frosty. On the one hand, the GDR was too Stalinist for the Gorbachev clique, on the other Honecker and his supporters were too close to the West Germans (and their open-handed lending institutions) for the Soviets' comfort. If anything, the trip caused a further deterioration in relations with Moscow. Honecker had not consulted Gorbachev before announcing the visit, and it was a slight the Russian never forgot.

Honecker's trip to the West also changed nothing with regard to the Berlin Wall or the fortified border between East and West Germany. Though the automatic-fire installations had been removed from the interstate border in the early 1980s, as part of the Western credits deal, and in Berlin the notorious dog-runs had also been dismantled, the Wall was still there, as lethal as ever.

This subject had been raised while Honecker was in West Germany in September 1987. In an intimate meeting with Chancellor Kohl, the West German leader had almost casually questioned the 'shoot-to-kill' order. Before setting out from East Berlin, Honecker had prepared himself for just this eventuality. His assistants had ferreted out the wording of the regulations on the emergency use of firearms by the West German border police and included it in his briefing materials. Honecker now recited these back to Kohl and said, 'For our people, it's just the same as for yours'. Of course, in the West German case the firing of 'warning shots' was stipulated, but Honecker moved smoothly to assure Kohl: 'We don't want anyone to be killed. But you have to obey regulations in the restricted military area.'[12]

But the question would not go away. In the previous five years (1982–6 inclusive), a total of six deaths occurred on the Berlin Wall. The worst year was 1986, when three died, two of them in a single attempt to crash a truck through from East to West. The escapers perished in a hail of bullets when the truck came to a halt in no man's land. These killings could not be concealed – many had observed them from the Western side. In the case of the two following deaths, however, the East German authorities took successful measures to make the murders 'deniable'.

Michael Bittner, a 25-year-old bricklayer, had been born on 31 August 1961. He was just a few days younger than the Berlin Wall.

Bittner had applied several times to leave the GDR, without success. An hour or so after midnight on 24 November 1986 he approached the

Wall in the suburban area of Glienicke/Nordbahn, where it bordered on the French sector of West Berlin. He carried a ten-foot wooden ladder. With the aid of this, Bitter made it over the hinterland wall. Then he hit the signal fence and set off alarm sirens and automatic searchlights. This caught the attention of two guards who were patrolling about 200 metres distant. They advanced as he raced across the 'death-strip', and called upon him to stop. He did not do so. They fired warning shots. Still Bittner pressed on towards West Berlin. In fact, he actually reached the border wall with the West and managed to scramble on to it. He was now under heavy automatic fire from the two guards. He called out in despair, 'Let me over!' Those would be his last words. Michael Bittner was struck by several bullets and collapsed back into Eastern territory. He died half an hour later of a wound that had ruptured the heart wall.

The East Germans chose to overcome the embarrassment of this killing by pretending it hadn't happened. Within hours of Bittner's death, the *Stasi* moved to cover up the incident. The death certificate and autopsy report were destroyed. The East German authorities declared that he had made contact with a Western escape organisation (or 'trader in human beings') and had been successfully smuggled to the West. With breath-taking cynicism, they even issued a warrant for his arrest, which remained in force while the GDR still existed. Bittner's brother and mother were told he had escaped to West Berlin. For years, they hoped against all hope that this was true. Only in 1990, when East German government documents were accessed, did they learn of his death and the cover-up that had followed.[13]

Worse happened three months later. On 12 February 1987, 24-year-old Lutz Schmidt and his friend Peter Schulze tried to crash a truck through the Wall in the southern suburbs of Berlin, near East Berlin's Schönefeld Airport. The weather was foggy. In the confusion they almost collided with a border-police truck that was patrolling the border area. They careered off the road and their wheels got stuck in the soft ground. The two young men left the vehicle and headed off to cross the Wall on foot. Border guards opened fire. Schmidt was shot through the heart and died almost immediately. Remarkably, Schulze pressed on and made it over to the West Berlin district of Neukölln, perhaps saved by the poor visibility.

As in the case of Bittner, there was an imediate cover-up. Schmidt's wife was told that he had been shot, but at the same time was forced by the *Stasi* to corroborate the official story – that he had died in an unfortunate traffic accident. They never released his clothing to her or allowed anyone to view the body. The *Stasi* took over the organisation of Schmidt's funeral, at which his body was cremated. When neighbours continued to question the official story, his widow was forcibly resettled to another part of the city, where her tragic story would be unknown.[14]

After this, there were no more deaths on the Wall for almost two years. For the most part, East Germans had given up on this risky method of leaving the Workers' and Peasants' State. Instead, they were applying for exit permits.

Following the issuing of 30,000 such permits in 1984, applications rose to 27,000 in 1985 and 58,000 in 1986. In 1987, the year of Lutz Schmidt's death at the Wall and of Honecker's visit to West Germany, the number of applications reached 112,000.[15] For a complex of reasons, ordinary people were not as afraid of the East German state as they had once been. They wanted out, and they were prepared to say so.

In 1984, the *Stasi* registered less than forty 'extrusions' (*Ausschleusungen*), as it delicately referred to organised escapes from East Germany. Where in the 1960s these had been numbered in their thousands, and even in the 1970s in their hundreds, by the 1980s the escape business had become a tiny cottage industry, scarcely politically or statistically significant. Pressure was building up, but it was pressure of a different, less spectacular kind which would prove even more fateful for the GDR.

In West Germany there were few politicians of Left or Right who still made grand and angry speeches about the Wall, or who openly supported dissidents in the GDR. One of the few exceptions to the passivity of the Western politicians was the courageous Green Bundestag deputy Petra Kelly, who spoke her mind on official trips to East Germany far more frankly than her more right-wing colleagues. The notion of 'convergence' had originally, in the 1960s, been intended as a kind of slow and subtle route to self-determination for all Germans, but by the 1980s the means had become all, and the end had been largely forgotten.

The only major political figure to challenge this increasingly relaxed attitude towards the Wall was the same man who, in 1978, had attracted

the attention of the *Stasi* observers at Checkpoint Charlie: Ronald Reagan. Now more than half-way through his second term as president of the United States, the 76-year-old had lost none of his fierce and occasionally undiplomatic anti-Communist drive. In June 1987 he arrived in West Berlin to join the city's 750th-anniversary celebrations.

'General Secretary Gorbachev,' Reagan thundered in front of the Brandenburg Gate, 'if you seek peace – if you seek prosperity for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe – if you seek liberalisation, come here to this gate, Mr Gorbachev, open this gate. Mr Gorbachev, tear down this wall.'

All the same, three months later, Erich Honecker was received with honours in West Germany. No one was impolite enough to raise the matter of the Wall, or the deaths, or the continuing persecution of dissidents by the *Stasi*, or the fact that his people still had to put their hands in the fire before they wrote exit-visa applications. The attitude of most West German politicians was summed up by a prominent Social Democrat in 1987: 'Reunification is a big lie!' (*Die Wiedervereinigung ist eine Lebenslüge!*) he declared. His name was Gerhard Schröder, later to become Helmut Kohl's successor as chancellor of Germany.

East Germany seemed to be becoming a permanent and acceptable feature of the international landscape. In 1982 the SPD established a so-called 'Joint Commission for Fundamental Values', a kind of talking shop in which East German *apparatchiks* and SPD politicians could discuss issues of mutual interest amid lavish hospitality, for all the world as if the SED were a fellow democratic party competing in the same political market-place.

All this gave East Germany a new respectability. No wonder, then, that the East German leadership entered 1989 in a state of blissful self-confidence. No one seemed prepared to offer a serious challenge to their authority or legitimacy.

While Honecker and his supporters continued to promote a hard ideological line, there were indications that in certain areas East Germany was being allowed to liberalise. Honecker had become adept at uttering soothing bromides that would keep his benefactors in the West happy. In July 1987, the GDR officially abolished the death penalty. Just as Honecker had told Kohl in September 1987 that no one wanted to see

deaths on the so-called German-German border, so he continued to deny that there was any 'shoot-to-kill' order.

Then, in February 1989, almost two years to the day after the Wall had claimed its previous victim, a young East Berliner decided to test the regime's new humanitarian claims.

Barman Chris Gueffroy was twenty years old and due to be conscripted into the East German army in May. He hated being made to defend a state that he loathed. Chris wanted to travel, especially to America. Then he and his friend Christian Gaudian heard from an acquaintance serving with the border police in Thuringia that the 'shoot-to-kill' order had secretly been abandoned. This was exciting news.

At around eleven on the evening of 5 February 1989, the two young men approached the border with West Berlin, which ran along the Britz district canal. It was a cold night, minus-three centigrade (27° F). They crept through a deserted 'weekend colony', a group of little allotments, each with their own hut, where Berliners came at the weekends and in the summer to relax. The friends had dismanted a clawed garden hoe and tied the spiked head to a length of strong rope. The plan was to toss this improvised grappling hook over the first barrier, a high barred fence, and haul themselves over. This part was a success. They got over the high fence undetected. Five metres further on stood a lower fence. They also managed to climb this without trouble. Perhaps it was true, and the whole Wall was now a harmless fake? But this last barrier turned out to be wired. Before they knew it, an alarm had been touched off and searchlights automatically flooded the area.

Reality bit, with a vengeance. Guards in a nearby watch-tower had been alerted to the intruders' presence. They fired warning shots. Trying to avoid their line of sight, the two young men ran in zigzag fashion parallel to the border, Chris to the fore, frantically seeking a way across the next lattice fence, the last before the canal.

Within moments they had tragic confirmation that the 'shoot-to-kill' order was no dead letter. They ran straight into two guards approaching from the opposite direction and were greeted with a hail of fire. Gueffroy caught ten bullets in the chest and died immediately. His companion, wounded in the foot, tumbled to the ground.

Christian Gaudian was arrested, recovered, and was put on trial. There

was the by now habitual attempt to cover up the cause of Chris Gueffroy's death, but this time it failed. Western observers were alerted by a death notice in the East Berlin *Berliner Zeitung* which referred to the 'tragic accident' that had ended his young life.

Chris Gueffroy's mother was not allowed to see his body. Against his family's wishes, he was cremated, according to the *Stasi*'s standard practice. The world learned the truth about the killing from a reporter for the West German *Frankfurter Rundschau* who slipped through the *Stasi* security cordon to attend the funeral.

For the first time in years, a death at the Wall caused an international outcry. In April, Honecker lifted the 'shoot-to-kill' order. Too late for Chris Gueffroy.

Since the East Germans had never admitted that the order existed in the first place, Honecker's decision remained a state secret. It was indicative of the regime's growing guilt and unease that even in the official report of the killing, there is no mention made of shooting, or of the fatal wounds that Chris Gueffroy suffered. The document simply states in mealy-mouthed regime-speak that the border guards 'carried through border-tactical activities and placed both border violators under arrest'. By 1989, shooting people on the border was unacceptable, and even the cosseted old men at Wandlitz knew it.[16]

None the less, the Wall still stood proud and ugly, with its sturdy blocks, its spikes and fences and alarms and watch-towers, seemingly permanent and impregnable. Its fate would not be determined in Berlin. Mostly it would be decided hundreds of miles away, by people who had decided that a Communism which needed to be enforced by guns and barbed wire was not a Communism worth having.

The Maginot Line was another of the great walls of history. Running along the German frontier from Longwy in north-eastern France south to the Swiss border near Basel, the line was the brainchild of a French élite determined to prevent a repeat of the horrendous conflict that had devastated their country between 1914 and 1918. It would make another invasion impossible. Or so they believed.

The idea came from the supreme French commander, Marshal Joffre. It was supported by the legendary Marshal Pétain, whose defence of

Verdun, the greatest fortress on the Western Front, during World War One seemed to suggest that France could be successfully protected by a chain of similar strongpoints. The project was brought to fruition by André Maginot, French Minister of Defence during the late 1920s, and was built between 1930 and 1936 at a cost of three billion French francs (approx. $120 million in 1933 or around $2 billion at current values).

The Maginot Line had concrete walls thicker than in any fortress ever built. Its massive guns were placed on turntables in steel-plated cupolas. There were recreation areas, living quarters – many air-conditioned – and well-stocked subterranean storehouses. Underground railways connected various portions of the line so that troops could be moved swiftly to threatened points in the defences. The tunnels extended over 150 kilometres, with 39 military units, 70 bunkers, 500 artillery and infantry groups, and 500 casemates for guns, shelters, and observation towers.

There was one problem. As a pushy tank colonel named Charles de Gaulle had pointed out in the early 1930s, future wars were unlikely to be static. Mobile armour and air power would become increasingly decisive. Moreover, in 1936, Belgium, which had hitherto been France's ally and formed an integral part of a common defensive system, made a declaration of neutrality. This left the French northern flank embarrassingly exposed. The French built fairly desultory defences along the Belgian border and continued to proclaim the Maginot fortifications' impregnability to one and all. Many were impressed, above all the French public.

In May/June 1940, the German forces went into action. They were divided into three groups positioned in the shape of a huge 'sickle'. Their first army group sat tight on the Rhine border, where the Maginot Line was overwhelmingly strong, thus tying up large French forces. The second army group, however, swept in from the north to violate the neutrality of the Netherlands and Belgium. The third was the 'wild card'. Composed largely of mobile armour and mechanised troops, it sneaked through the Ardennes forest into Eastern Belgium and Luxembourg.

The Ardennes area was lightly defended because the dense woodland was thought impenetrable by large bodies of men. To prove them wrong, the German armoured spearheads pushed through into north-eastern France within a matter of days, cutting off the Maginot Line from the

rear. France fell within the month, with scarcely a shot fired from the fortifications upon which France had bestowed so much treasure and so much trust.

So, the Germans in 1940 solved the problem of the Maginot Line by going round it. This was also a method often favoured by the 'barbarians' whom the Great Wall of China was supposed to keep out. The captive population of East Germany in 1989 was no different.

On 18 January, looking forward to the year that would see his seventy-seventh birthday and the fortieth birthday of the GDR, Erich Honecker allowed himself the confident boast that the Wall 'will still be standing in fifty or a hundred years, if the reasons for its existence have not been removed'. This despite the fact that three days earlier the GDR had signed yet another treaty in the Helsinki Process, clearly stating that any individual possessed 'the unrestricted right to leave . . . and return to his own country'. Afterwards, Honecker breezily explained to the Soviet ambassador that 'we gave instructions to sign it, but we won't carry it out'.[17]

There were also plans in hand to create this hundred-year Wall. It would, of course, be a 'high-tech' Wall, more advanced and more completely impregnable than any previous incarnations. Electronic sensors and cameras would enable the border authorities to detect and foil any would-be escapers well before they reached the actual fortifications, in this way reducing the unfortunate deaths that did so much to harm the regime's image.

As the commander of the border force expressed it, in a masterpiece of GDR jargon: 'Precedence will be given to the utilisation of physical mechanisms of action and technical methods such that, while maintaining high security, the enemy's ability to find excuses for defamation against the GDR will be reduced.'[18]

But, high-tech or low-tech, there were hints that the Wall was becoming superfluous. In the first week of January 1989, twenty East Germans who had unsuccessfully applied for exit visas sought refuge at the Permanent Representation of West Germany in East Berlin. They were allowed to leave on 11 January, without punishment and with the promise that within six months there would be a 'good end' to their endeavours. By the end of January, some had already arrived at the refugee camp in Giessen, West Germany.

But the real drama was not happening in East Germany, or not as yet. In January 1989, after years of uneasy manoeuvring, the non-Communist Polish trade-union movement, Solidarity, entered into negotiations with the Soviet-supported government in Warsaw. The subject of these discussions was the sharing of power, but their effect was to reawaken the ghosts of Stalinism. During the negotiations, the Soviets finally admitted responsibility for the wartime massacre of Polish officers at Katyn – which they had previously always blamed on the Germans. It was a hugely important admission.

Meanwhile, in the Baltic states, which had been carved up between Hitler and Stalin exactly fifty years ago, in 1939, a human chain of a million Latvians, Lithuanians and Estonians linked hands to protest against the infamous pact that had robbed them of their independence and led to death, oppression and deportation for many of their parents' generation.

Then came the act of physical liberation that would prove the ultimate doom of the Wall. On 2 May, the Hungarian government, now in the hands of pluralistically minded reform Communists, astonished the world by beginning to dismantle their hitherto fortified border with Austria. President George H.W. Bush, on a visit to West Germany, was presented with piece of barbed wire from Hungary's demolished border fence. 'Let Berlin be next,' Ronald Reagan's successor proclaimed.

The results of the Hungarians' action were sensational. It took a while for the significance of the change to sink in, but by 1 July more than 25,000 East Germans who had decided to 'vacation' in Hungary, somehow ended up in Austria. Erich Honecker's subjects had found a way around his Maginot Line.

Meanwhile, even in East Germany itself, the dissidents and the opposition were gaining confidence. A couple of weeks after the Hungarian border was demilitarised, local elections were held in the GDR.

As usual, government candidates received almost 99 per cent of the vote. But this time, church observers such as Pastor Eppelmann had been present when the votes were counted. They protested. The figures for 'no' votes published by the government were only a third of those actually declared in the presence of the church observers. The church openly announced that 'no' votes had made up at least 7 per cent of the poll,

implicitly accusing the government of fraud. It was a breach of the 'concordat' with the regime that had kept an uneasy peace between God and Caesar for the past decade.

There were small demonstrations against the election results. Arrests were made, but they had little effect. In Leipzig, now becoming the largest opposition stronghold, special prayer meetings, held on Monday evenings, were attracting over 2,000 participants a week by the end of May 1989.

But the regime gave little or no ground. Although in practice more exit visas were being granted, the law was not changed. The government introduced an appeals process for refused exit visas, but the ability to leave East Germany remained a privilege, not a right.

In June, with discontent about the rigged local elections still simmering, Honecker made favourable remarks about the Chinese Communist government's violent suppression of pro-democracy demonstrations at Tiananmen Square in Beijing. The East German parliament passed a resolution applauding the 'suppression of a counter-revolution' in China. There was a continuing trickle of arrests. Many dissidents were immediately shunted off to West Germany, as had become the regime's habit over the past few years. However, plans had also been put in place by Mielke's State Security Ministry for the opening of secret concentration camps capable of holding up to 200,000 dissidents, should the regime decide it was necessary to bring the people to heel by force.[19]

The pressures from outside were becoming stronger. For the first time since 1945, semi-free elections were held in neighbouring Poland. In crass contrast to the shameless rigging of the May elections in East Germany, the non-Communist Solidarity movement won every seat it was permitted to contest in the *Sjem* (house of deputies), and 99 out of 100 seats in the Senate, where it could contest all.

Meanwhile, as summer approached, thousands still stood in line to meet the beady stare of the *Stasi*-trained border officials at Checkpoint Charlie or the underground cattle-pen of the 'Palace of Tears' in Friedrichstrasse. The action was not in Berlin. East Berlin was stifled under a blanket of security, and preoccupied with the grand celebrations planned for the fortieth anniversary of the GDR in October.

The signs of weakness behind the façade were all there, and easily spotted later with hindsight's wisdom. The prickly relationship between East

Berlin and Moscow was becoming all too apparent. When Gorbachev visited West Germany in June – and was ecstatically received by a nation weary of Cold War anxiety and nuclear confrontation – the reformist Soviet leader made no rejoinder to Chancellor Kohl's critical remarks about the Wall and the continuing lack of freedom in East Germany.

Gorbachev's reticence was viewed in East Berlin, quite correctly, as a change of tack and – in traditional Communist terms – a betrayal. Whatever their private feelings about the GDR, Khrushchev or Brezhnev would have felt duty-bound to strike back hard on their German satellite's behalf. Gorbachev said nothing.

In mid-July, Gorbachev went even further, publicly repudiating the so-called 'Brezhnev Doctrine'. This principle, formalised following the crushing of the Prague Spring in 1968, permitted the Soviet Union to intervene against any country within the Warsaw Pact that attempted to change its political or social system. Addressing the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, Gorbachev declared that all European countries were now free to choose their own social and political order and excluded the use of military force between East and West or 'within alliances'. One of his aides referred to this jokily as the 'Sinatra Doctrine', with a play on the singer's great hit 'My Way' – countries could now do things 'their way'.

The bizarre contrast between East Germany's continuing espousal of 'dinosaur' Marxism-Leninism and the new spirit of openness and risk in Moscow was shown by the Honecker regime's unheard-of decision, in 1989, to forbid the distribution of certain Soviet publications in East Germany. Especially singled out for a ban was the monthly German-language magazine *Sputnik*, which supplied a digest of the Soviet press. Such English-language delights as *Moscow News* and the newspaper of the British Communist Party, the *Daily Worker* – for many years the only British newspaper available in East Berlin – were also taken off the news-stands. Gorbachev's radical speeches were reported only partially, or not at all. However, criticisms of the Gorbachev reforms, by his internal opponents and by Mao's anxious heirs in Beijing, found their way into East German newspapers.

It was a feverish summer. And, in defiance of the natural order, as autumn approached the temperature rose even higher.