

BLOOMSBURY

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13 AUGUST 1961-9 NOVEMBER 1989
THE BERLIN WALL

'ICH BIN EIN BERLINER'

THERE WERE SEVERAL REASONS for the decline of the escape-helper networks within a few years of the building of the Wall. The increasingly effective fortification of the Wall was one, but there were other, more subtle influences.

For almost two and a half years, West Berliners had been all but barred from the East. After lengthy and complex negotiations in the autumn of 1963, a 'crossing-permit agreement' (*Passierscheinabkommen*) was signed. Under it, West Berliners were granted temporary permits to visit close relatives in the East during the Christmas/New Year period. Over 700,000 took advantage of the concession in 1.2 million cross-border visits. Once the holiday season was over, the ban was resumed for all but the most serious family-hardship cases, but a precedent had been set – a hopeful one and yet at the same time subtly corrosive.

From August 1961 to December 1963, no East German could go to West Berlin (apart from a few loyalists, usually on the regime's business), and no West Berliner to the East. This was clear-cut. But once weeping, delighted families had been brought together again, if only for a short time, the hope of a more liberal visiting policy subsisted constantly in the background. It made the people of West Berlin suitable subjects for blackmail. The East Germans could threaten to snatch back the new 'concessions' if the West did not co-operate in, for instance, combating escapes.

Already while the first 'crossing-permit agreement' was being discussed, the West Berlin Senate had pressured escape groups to limit their activities, so as not to endanger the agreement. One of Wolfgang Fuchs's tunnels, which had been due to 'break through' and start getting people out at Christmas 1963, was reluctantly delayed until 5 January, the last

day of the West-to-East visiting period. As soon as the postponed 'breakthrough' to the Eastern side was achieved, the organisers realised they had come out not in a basement, as planned, but in the neighbouring coal cellar. This would have been acceptable during the holiday period, but now the situation was much more risky. Sure enough, after a few escapers had been brought out on the first day, and despite efforts to camouflage the opening, the tunnel was discovered and reported to the Communist authorities – by coal-delivery men on their first day back at work after the seasonal break.¹

In autumn 1964, negotiations began about another 'crossing-permit agreement' for the coming festive season. An agreement was arrived at, providing for two fourteen-day visit periods before the end of the year, including Christmas. Then came 'Tunnel 57' and the shooting of the East German soldier Egon Schultz.

After the 'Tunnel 57' tragedy, the East German negotiators began asking pointedly if the West Berliners wanted 'crossing permits and visits for relatives or a prolongation of the Cold War'. Short visit periods were also agreed for 1965 and 1966, but many in East Berlin were already doubtful. As early as 1964, a *Stasi* report frankly told the East German leadership that such concessions could not be justified if Western propaganda continued to celebrate the agreements as 'a successful penetration of the Wall'. Only if the 'enemy' agreed to respect totally the integrity of the GDR's borders should this concession be extended. After one final Christmas agreement (1966), the concession was not renewed. It would be years before West Berliners could once again visit the East – as part of a more general settlement which went a long way to granting the Communist regime the recognition it craved.²

During the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962, almost everyone had expected the Soviets to apply extra pressure via Berlin. The Americans had, after all, demanded the right to board and inspect Soviet missiles bound for Cuba. There had been anxiety that the Soviets would respond with a similar move against Allied traffic going into Berlin. This would have amounted to an effective blockade and put the West in a difficult position.³

The failure of Khrushchev to make such a move against Berlin, or anywhere else in the world where American interests were vulnerable,

helped President Kennedy and his advisers to pull off a considerable victory over Cuba. After the failure of the West to prevent his imposition of a border wall in Berlin, Khrushchev thought he had Kennedy's measure. This led him to a foolhardy attempt to station missiles on Cuba. By facing down the Russians there, Kennedy finally proved that he was as tough and as smart as the Communist leader. If not smarter.

The humiliating outcome of yet another Khrushchev-engineered international crisis would help start other leaders in Moscow thinking that their brilliant but impulsive boss might be more of a liability than a benefit. Two years later, almost to the day, Khrushchev was stripped of all powers in a bloodless palace revolution.

As it happened, presidential adviser Walt Rostow visited Europe at the time of the Cuban Crisis and met Brandt. Despite the Fechter tragedy, which was still very much on everyone's minds, he thought West Berlin's morale was 'pretty good'. He expressed the basic situation regarding the Wall at the end of 1962 quite frankly:

We should be aware that the impulse among students in West Berlin to take action to help refugees over and under the Wall is very strong. Brandt is aware of their activities and has decided that he cannot, in political safety, prevent them from carrying out such enterprises.⁴

Within a handful of years, the attitude towards the escape movement had changed radically. The inherently abnormal border situation had become, in effect, 'normal' – proof, if anyone needs it, that people will get used to just about anything over time. The kind of polarised anti-Communist attitudes that had been general in West Berlin at the beginning of the 1960s had given way, for much of the population – including the political and media élite – at best to a more nuanced view of the Cold War, at worst to a bite-the-hand-that-feeds anti-Americanism.

After the Cuban Missile Crisis, the main theatre of the Cold War did not switch back to Europe. Despite crablike progress towards a half-tolerable status quo in Berlin during the rest of the decade, and the usual East–West name-calling, at no point did the city become a potential flashpoint for the Third World War as it had been between 1948 and 1963.

President Kennedy's famous visit to Berlin in June 1963 represented a high-water mark in West Berlin's self-conscious status as a beacon of freedom. The visit was part of a wider European trip, which included an official visit to West Germany. This had been planned for some time, but only at the end of March 1963 did the President and his advisers finally decide to make a detour to Berlin.

The Adenauer government in Bonn had no interest in encouraging such a thing – as in 1961 during Vice-President Johnson's visit, they were aware that it might redound to the benefit of Mayor Willy Brandt, who would be seeking election as German chancellor once more in 1965. They would rather Kennedy stayed exclusively in West Germany proper. Important figures in Washington, including Information Agency chief Ed Murrow, also opposed a visit by Kennedy to the walled city. Kennedy's appearance there, Murrow felt, might imply that spirits needed lifting and would therefore send a subtle message of weakness to the East.

But finally the majority, including especially the President's brother Robert, was persuaded that the trip could do no harm and that *not* to go would send a depressing message both to Berliners and West Germans. The Wall had now been in place for almost two years, but no leader of the Allied protecting powers – neither Macmillan of Britain, nor de Gaulle of France – had seen fit to visit Berlin. De Gaulle had, in fact, performed an entire state visit to West Germany in September 1962, touring in a wide arc from Hamburg to Munich, but had conspicuously ignored Berlin. For Kennedy, leader of the foremost and most passionately democratic of the protectors, to visit Germany and not go to West Berlin, would be to send an unmistakably dismal and discouraging message to its people and to the world.⁵

President Kennedy's arrival at Tegel Airport at 9.40 in the morning of 26 June 1963 brought him to the last stop on his four-day tour of Germany. There had been plenty of press interest during Kennedy's travels through the Rhine and Main valleys, but his visit to West Berlin was the high point for press and public alike. Some 1,500 journalists from all over the world flocked to West Berlin to cover the events.

Most people recall the four emotionally powerful (and grammatically dubious) words of German that Kennedy uttered during his address to

almost half a million West Berliners from a temporary platform set up in front of the Schöneberg Town Hall: 'Ich bin ein Berliner'. Far from being a triumph, however, for his advisers and for the West Berlin administration the speech was altogether problematic.

Almost none of what now seems memorable about Kennedy's speech was in the text, typed on roughly A5-sized cards, that he carried up on to the platform with him. Prepared by White House and State Department experts, his address was supposed to be relatively low-key. The situation in Berlin was peaceful compared with two years earlier, and it was in everyone's interests to keep it that way. His main priority was to encourage the city and its people – without provoking the Soviets or the East Germans into new aggressive measures.

But Kennedy did not stick to the prepared version. Perhaps it was the emotional effect of the visit to the Wall earlier that morning – Kennedy had been visibly moved by his first on-the-spot view of the cement blocks, the barbed wire and the watch-towers – but the parts of his speech that he improvised were both more stirring to the audience and more aggressively anti-Communist than planned.

Apart from the 'Ich bin ein Berliner' improvisation (which he conceived during an informal talk in Brandt's office just before the speech, writing the phrase in his own phonetic code), Kennedy also departed drastically from the script by appearing, in a rhetorically powerful repetition, to preach not coexistence but a fundamental incompatibility between the Communist and capitalist systems. In these extemporised passages, Kennedy attacked those who saw no difference between the systems, who said democrats should 'work with the Communists', or who claimed that Communism was bad but produced beneficial economic results. After enumerating each of these sins, Kennedy – striking his lectern with an angry energy – declaimed: 'Let them come to Berlin!' And at the climactic end he repeated it in German: 'Lasst sie nach Berlin kommen!'⁶

Kennedy went on to attack the Wall, calling it 'the most obvious and vivid demonstration of the failures of the Communist system'. At the end of his speech he left the prepared text once more and uttered the famous words again, ending: '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."'

After the President finished, he stepped back quickly, almost abruptly. The vast crowd went wild. A chant went up, so ecstatic and powerful it could have been heard in every ministry and party bureau in East Berlin: 'Ken-Ne-Dy! Ken-Ne-Dy!'⁷

Brandt waited for the roar to die down, then began his own speech. The Mayor seemed tense and nervous. During Kennedy's attack on the Wall and Communism, instead of applauding he had stared stonily into the middle distance. During his speech, the excited crowd continued to chant Kennedy's name and to interrupt with shouted comments and cheers. Brandt's irritation was visible. It got worse when behind him the President and Adenauer responded to the interruptions with smiles and waves. At one point the crowd bellowed an Americanised version of Adenauer's first name, Konrad: 'Con-Ny! Con-Ny!' The Chancellor, delighted at this reception in a city where he was usually far from popular, stepped forward in acknowledgement, while his political foe, Brandt, was still speaking.

Brandt was worried by Kennedy's unexpectedly vehement anti-Communist tirade. There had been violent demonstrations by Western youths at the Wall the previous week, on the GDR's national day. He feared that this throng, roused by the President's fighting talk, could go out of control and turn Berlin back into a world flashpoint.

Above all, however, Brandt was surprised. Just two weeks previously, on 10 June, Kennedy had made an extremely important and well-publicised policy speech at American University in Washington, DC. On that day, Kennedy had talked openly of his hopes for détente with the Communists, and had referred to the common interest in peace that united an otherwise divided world.⁸ Brandt himself was working with Egon Bahr and his other advisers on a new, more flexible approach to the Berlin question and the problem of the two German states. This did not fit in at all with an attitude which cast doubt on whether any kind of coexistence was really possible, as Kennedy's just-delivered speech seemed to do.

The truth seems to be that Kennedy just got carried away. In the immediate aftermath of his speech, he was thrilled with all the applause and the excitement. Then came discussions with his advisers. McGeorge Bundy, for one, threw a douche over the mood when he told Kennedy

frankly: 'Mr President, I think you have gone too far.' Calming down, Kennedy seemed to agree. 'If I told them to go tear down the Berlin Wall, they would do it,' he ruefully told his military adviser, General McHugh.

Later, at the Free University's Henry Ford Building, symbol of American largess to West Berlin, the President gave another major speech. He stuck to the script. The talk was once more of peace and understanding, and of the part that Germany and Berlin could play in the relaxation of international tension. German reunification, the President was quite specific, could be approached only as a long-term project. While expressing full support for West Berlin's freedom, Kennedy made it clear, as the leader of a world power must, that the German question was part of, and not at the centre of, humanity's problems, and that like those other problems it would not be solved overnight.⁹

Kennedy's FU speech may have been a less emotionally moving address than the one at the Schöneberg Town Hall, but it was actually truer and more constructive. This too was something Berliners needed to hear.

At around 17.45, President Kennedy climbed back aboard *Air Force One*. He had been in Berlin for almost exactly eight hours, lead actor in a masterpiece of political and diplomatic theatre. The President flew off towards Ireland, there to revisit his family's Celtic roots and maybe garner a few extra Irish-American votes in the coming '64 election. On the plane, he told Theodore Sorensen, his Special Counsel that 'We'll never have another day like this one so long as we live'.¹⁰

Kennedy left behind an adoring city that still remembers him with gruff affection. He created at least one extra, lasting legend. The story of the 'jelly donut'.

For many years, a story has been entertaining the world, to the effect that when the President uttered those hastily included words 'Ich bin ein Berliner' outside the Schöneberg Town Hall, he was committing a laughable grammatical *faux pas*. By inserting the indefinite article ('ein'), he was calling himself not a citizen of Berlin, but a jelly donut (known throughout Germany – but not in the capital itself – as a 'Berliner'). This led, it is said, to great hilarity among the listening crowd.

Wonderful as this story is, it does not seem to be accurate. After all, when he was composing the phrase he had with him Rober Lochner and Theodore Sorensen, both of whom – especially Lochner – were fluent in German. The construction he used was an unusual one. Normally, a German simply describing where he comes from would say 'Ich bin Berliner' (or Dresdner or Münchner). But Kennedy was not actually from Berlin, as everyone knew full well. He was rather making a rhetorical flourish, including himself in the abstract club of being a Berliner in spirit. The insertion of 'ein' made this clear. One German author explains it so: an actor introducing himself at a party would simply announce, 'Ich bin Schauspieler'; but if he was making a big issue of being an actor, claiming that his calling was relevant to some important matter, he might say: 'Ich bin *ein* Schauspieler.' The alleged amusement among the crowd seems to have been added afterwards as the story got around. The general view at the time held that the audience felt profoundly moved.¹¹

So the President left a legend behind and, thanks to his second speech, a somewhat reassured Brandt.

The West Berlin Mayor had spent the past two years originating a new policy that would take account of the new situation in divided Germany, and also of the obvious disinclination of any of the occupation powers to pull the German nation's irons out of the fire. The division of the country (mirrored in Berlin) was a fact. So what to do? Adenauer, now eighty-six years old and nearing the end of his long period in office, had been wrong-footed by the Wall. His government continued to loudly affirm the sole right of the Federal Republic to represent all Germans, and to complain about the illegitimacy of the East German regime and the barbarism of its border measures. However, neither the Chancellor nor anyone else had come up with a new policy that could offer hope of change or improvement in the situation.

By the end of 1963, Adenauer had been forced into retirement, Kennedy was dead from an assassin's bullet in Dallas, and Prime Minister Macmillan of Britain, wracked by scandal and exhaustion, had tendered his resignation to Queen Elizabeth II. Even Khrushchev would last only another ten months into 1964.

In the meantime, Willy Brandt had developed a policy which, controversial as it was to many nationalist and conservative Germans,

represented a practical response to the facts on the ground in Germany. It would go under the name of 'Eastern Policy' (*Ostpolitik*).

Willy Brandt's most recent biographer sees the bloody events of August 1962 as the impulse to this new way of approaching the German problem. From this time, the Mayor started to move gradually, even furtively, towards a new, less uncompromising policy towards the East.

If a crisis showed a cathartic effect [writes Peter Merseburger], then it was the one surrounding Peter Fechter. The Mayor toured factories and branches of the administration, trying to bring home to Berliners what was and was not possible. It was not possible to talk away, or curse away, or bomb away the Berlin Wall – but perhaps it was possible to create holes in it and make it transparent so that West Berlin could come to an arrangement with, learn to live with the hated monstrosity.^{1,2}

So far, so logical. But could he take his people with him? Brandt gave his major policy speech three weeks after Kennedy's visit. His venue was the Evangelical Academy in Tutzing, on the idyllic Starnberger See lake, between Munich and the Alps. Here he found himself in the conservative south of Germany, hundreds of miles from Berlin, confirming that he should be reckoned a national figure.

The Mayor's speech was little more than a repeat of the address he had given earlier that year in English at Harvard University, and in many ways echoed Kennedy's words at the FU in Berlin the previous month. Despite this, it attracted huge attention. This was not really because of what Brandt said, but because of what his press assistant, Egon Bahr told that very same audience that same evening.

Once more, chance played a key role in events. Brandt was held up on his way to the meeting. In order to keep the audience occupied, Bahr delivered his own prepared remarks, not as an afternote to the Mayor's, as planned, but before.

Bahr's talk, entitled 'Change through Convergence' (*Wandel durch Annäherung*) had been calculated as a low-key illustration of how his chief's 'big-picture' policy of tension reduction might be realised on a

practical level. Bahr declared that, so far as German reunification was concerned, the policy of 'all or nothing' had failed. So what could be done for Germans in East and West? The idea of reunification would not be abandoned, but instead of being a great dramatic act it might rather become 'a process with many small steps and stages'. In a world divided along ideological lines, the GDR was a reality, and so long as the Soviet Union continued to support it militarily and in other ways, the Communist German state, abhorrent as it might be, had to be lived with. The aim must be to make life easier for East Germans through mutual trade and contact. If the Communist regime survived for the moment, then that was just too bad.

Brandt had been gently creeping towards just such a public view – it reflected the private conversations that had taken place within his entourage and with the Americans over the previous months. However, Bahr's speech, especially since it now seemed to appear as the main item of the evening, aroused enormous attention, by no means all favourable. Bahr himself claimed to be astonished:

When I dictated the 'Change through Convergence' speech I had no idea that I was being courageous or that I needed to be careful. I was just making concrete what was in Brandt's speech, weighing it up, thinking it through more precisely; the discussion was supposed just to be taken a little further.¹³

That evening in July 1963 none the less represented the beginning of a new era in relations between East and West Germany, and the beginning of what would become known as the *Ostpolitik*. This policy would recognise the facts of the post-war settlement, which had removed large areas of ancient German territory and awarded them to Poland, Czechoslovakia, and (in the case of the area around Königsberg – now Kaliningrad) the Soviet Union.

There was uproar in the press, especially in outlets owned by Springer. The CDU protested. But the fact remained that the conservatives did not actually have an alternative. Once the immediate brouhaha had settled down, this point seemed to percolate into the minds of the general population.

In West Berlin, as autumn drew on, the Mayor's representatives sat down and hammered out 'crossing-permit agreements' with East German representatives. The involvement of the West Berlin administration might have seemed like a major concession but, in fact, ever since the late 1940s, middle-ranking East and West German and West Berlin officials had quietly discussed mutual trade and transport concerns, with binding agreements arrived at. This was the reality on which Bahr planned to base his 'convergence'.

The West German conservatives might attack the 'convergence' idea as treachery, but the East was, in its paranoid way, more clear-seeing in this matter. The Communist regime was torn between its yearning for international recognition and a 'convergence' with West Germany which, as the GDR leadership realised, might lead to rather more intimacy than was strictly desirable.

In the September 1965 elections, the SPD made further gains. Brandt again failed to achieve victory, but the Social Democrats' share of the vote continued to edge upwards. The conservatives' share continued its decline, while the liberal Free Democrats lost quite heavily. But the conservative/liberal coalition, led by Adenauer's successor, Ludwig Erhard, hung on to power.

As Economics Minister, Professor Erhard had been the architect of the West German 'economic miracle' after 1949, but, like so many long-serving successful second-in-commands, once he finally heaved himself into the top position he swiftly confirmed why he had always been the deputy and not the chief. Erhard proved inept at both party-politicking and foreign policy. Moreover, for the first time since the end of the war, German industry went into recession and a 'black hole' appeared in the state finances. With half a million West Germans unemployed – paradisiacal, at just over 2 per cent of the work-force, as this may seem by twenty-first-century standards – in 1966 there was anxious talk of a return to the 1930s.

In the autumn of 1966, the political world turned upside-down. The SPD joined the government, and Brandt became Foreign Minister of West Germany. The free-market, middle-class liberals had walked out of the government after Erhard decided on tax increases to solve the budget problem.

A 'grand coalition' between SPD and CDU seemed the only solution. Brandt reluctantly agreed to leave West Berlin and go to Bonn as Foreign Minister. After Erhard resigned, Brandt and several other SPD ministers entered government with the old enemy, the CDU, under a new chancellor, Kurt Georg Kiesinger. A silver-haired, silver-tongued Swabian lawyer who looked the picture of a distinguished leader, Kiesinger laboured under the burden of having been a member for twelve years of the National Socialist Party and a prominent employee of Dr Josef Goebbels' Propaganda Ministry. The East German propagandists could scarcely believe their luck.

Brandt started cautiously with his policy of 'convergence', first dropping the 'Hallstein Doctrine' and taking up relations with East Bloc countries, even though they recognised the GDR. However, not until he became chancellor himself, three years later, would he make meaningful progress on the question of East Germany.

Meanwhile, there was no point in waiting for political or economic collapse in the GDR, as the West Germans had hoped until the rude awakening of 13 August 1961. By the mid-1960s, the East German regime had stabilised.

The day the Berlin Wall became a reality has often been characterised as the 'second birth' of the East German state, the moment at which it became truly viable. Ulbricht was right. Without the Wall, the state he and his Russian protectors had created would not have survived. With it, though horribly and permanently compromised in the court of international public opinion, at least the GDR had a chance.

After the Wall was built, the haemorrhaging of the GDR's working population from East to West Germany all but stopped. Robbed of the previous supply of new labour for its booming industries by the sealing-off of the East, in October 1961 West Germany took the radical and far-reaching step of signing a treaty with Muslim Turkey, allowing for Turkish 'guest workers' to fill vacant jobs.

The German population between the Oder and Elbe rivers was now trapped in the narrow confines of the GDR, and Ulbricht had achieved the total control he always yearned for. The wave of arrests that followed the building of the Wall ebbed by the autumn of 1962, but the

underlying trend was still repressive. The number of *Stasi* officers increased from 17,500 in 1957 to three times that figure – 52,700 – in 1973, when Walter Ulbricht died, and this does not count the vast numbers of part-time informers ‘Unofficial Co-Workers’ (*Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter* = IM).

In the forty years of the GDR’s existence, at least 600,000 individuals worked for the *Stasi*. Some experts claim it was as high as between one and two million.¹⁴ This applied to a population that fell from around eighteen to sixteen million over the period concerned. Even if we take only the number of official, salaried *Stasi* officers, this gives a figure of roughly one secret policeman per 320 East Germans. By contrast, Hitler’s instrument of covert police control, the Gestapo, numbered a mere 20,000 in 1939 out of a total Reich population (without Austria) of seventy million, amounting to about one per 3,500 of the population.¹⁵ It is hard to escape the conclusion that the Gestapo’s success in controlling dissent, with a mere tenth of the *Stasi*’s full-time strength, was helped by the fact that, for most of its existence, the Nazi regime remained relatively speaking as popular a dictatorship as the GDR was unloved.

The *Stasi* retained a partisan, narrow role that had been very precisely and chillingly defined a few years earlier: ‘The Ministry of State Security is entrusted with the task of preventing or throttling at the earliest stages – using whatever means and methods may be necessary – all attempts to delay or hinder the victory of socialism.’¹⁶

Nevertheless, it was not enough just to keep arresting the country’s awkward citizens and strengthening the already stiflingly efficient internal-security apparatus – though both these things occurred in the period after 13 August 1961. Ordinary East Germans had to be given reasons to say yes to the regime. Some steam had to be allowed to escape from the pressure cooker. There had to be carrot as well as stick.

In accord with this principle, that hitherto unrepentant Stalinist, Ulbricht, now found sufficient courage to start experimenting a little. He fell in line with Khrushchev’s continuing anti-Stalin campaign at the XXII. Congress in October 1961. East Berlin’s Stalinallee became Karl-Marx-Allee, and the great dictator’s name vanished from other streets, factories, and other institutions too.

In economic matters, Ulbricht was surprisingly supportive of reform measures. There was more flexibility in pricing, an increased emphasis on the importance of technocratic expertise and R&D in industries, and the masses were also to be granted more consumer goods. This was a far cry from the triumphant attempt to overtake West Germany through rigorous 'command economics' in the late 1950s. It showed that Ulbricht was capable of learning a lesson if it revealed itself clearly enough.

While the so-called 'New Economic System' was being implemented, the government also brought in a whole new mass of social measures. These were intended to make the average East German more aware of the advantages of living in a closely knit, cradle-to-grave socialist system. Measures to improve the status and social involvement of youth (the young had always been a bit of a problem) while at the same time relaxing previously rigid political controls, an improved educational system, reformed family law, and so on – all impressively progressive and humane in their basic principles – were intended to help the GDR's citizens, confined as they now were, not just to accept their lot but even to see some advantage in it.

The new youth code even allowed the kids some jazz and a little pop music, 'properly channelled' of course. There was a limited cultural thaw in which works were published such as Christa Wolf's novel, *Der Geteilte Himmel* (*The Divided Heaven*), which dealt with a family divided by the Berlin Wall, albeit in a way that on the whole favoured the regime. Satirical leftists like the young Wolf Biermann (an ideological immigrant from West Germany) were also tolerated for a while.

The new family law recognised marriage and children as the basic unit and encouraged men to help with those family responsibilities. The regime might still talk of creating the 'socialist personality', but for most East Germans their way of life was starting to more closely resemble that of the traditional lower middle class than of a proletarian-revolutionary vanguard.

The 'New Economic System' didn't work all that well, but it worked better than the previous model. With the haemorrhaging of the population staunched, and increased support from other East Bloc governments, the perception of most East Germans in the later 1960s and 1970s was of

relative comfort and prosperity. Private consumption per household rose by almost a quarter between 1965 and 1970.

There remained problems with the supply of everyday items such as toothbrushes, potatoes, sanitary towels and toilet paper, but between 1960 and 1970, the percentage of households in possession of a TV set increased from 16.7 per cent to 69.1 per cent, of a refrigerator from 6.1 per cent to 56.4 per cent, and of a washing machine from 6.2 per cent to 53.6 per cent, 3.2 per cent of East Germans owned a car in 1960, 15.6 per cent in 1970 – though cars were expensive and waiting times for delivery years-long.¹⁷ Some called it ‘an East German economic miracle’. This was an exaggeration, but from a material point of view life was more tolerable than it had been in the 1950s.

The regime gradually gained from an obvious but key fact: the generation growing into adulthood within the decade after the Wall was built had no experience of any other kind of society. As one East German woman born around 1950 would say after 1989, she had not realised before the fall of the Wall that the place she lived in was so shabby, so grey, or its air so polluted. Compared with other Eastern European countries – the only foreign places East Germans could visit – the GDR seemed a quite advanced place that enjoyed a good standard of living.¹⁸

Apart from the élite – whose cosseted lifestyle at Wandlitz and elsewhere was hidden from the masses – almost no East Germans could be called rich. But there was free kindergarten provision, free medical care, subsidised rents and vacations (the latter usually organised through state-controlled trade unions and professional organisations), and free higher education for those of whom the state approved. If you conformed, and had no unusual ambitions or desires for an alternative lifestyle, and paid your dues literally and metaphorically to the SED or the ‘block’ parties, life could feel tranquil and secure.

And there were other things to be proud of in the ‘other Germany’. In the early 1950s, the state began an enormously ambitious campaign of encouraging sport. What began as a measure to improve health and productivity turned into a headlong quest for national prestige. Promising young athletes were picked out at an early age and sent to special sports schools. There, apart from the usual school lessons, the children

were subjected to intensive training under strict discipline and a background of uncompromising political indoctrination. As they approached adulthood, the most successful were directed into thirty or so extremely well-financed and equipped sports clubs in major towns and cities. These were often associated with the army and the *Stasi*, in which athletes were offered secure jobs that enabled them to retain a technical amateur status. At the Leipzig Research Institute for Physical Culture and Sport (Forschungsinstitut für Körperkultur und Sport), high-grade sports instructors and coaches were trained to manage the sports offensive.

The rewards for successful coaches and athletes were high: foreign travel, privileged treatment when it came to homes and cars, bonuses in Western currency. Unfortunately, the price was often equally high. At the 1968 Mexico Olympics, the GDR's team achieved third place in the medals table, behind only the USA and the USSR. Many competitors were already on dangerous performance-enhancing drugs such as anabolic steroids and hormones.

Olympic success strengthened this trend. From 1969, a comprehensive doping programme was embarked on. The Leipzig Institute, the Academy of Sciences in East Berlin, and the Jenapharm drugs company all collaborated shamelessly to ensure that East German athletes kept their place at the top of the international rankings. Such world-beating achievements provided other countries with a positive image of the German Communist state, as well as a sorely needed focus for communal pride back in the GDR. For a state of only sixteen million to enjoy such success was indeed amazing. Only after 1989 would the extent of this ruthless state conspiracy become clear. Many children and young people were given these powerful and often damaging drugs without their parents' permission, and many, as they experience middle age, suffer from disastrous long-term effects.¹⁹

In his twilight years, Walter Ulbricht presided over a walled fiefdom that eerily resembled the autocratic Prussian state of two centuries previously. East Germany was likewise an obsessively micro-managed, paternalistic, militarised economy in which the market-place played second fiddle to necessities of state, and where freakishly pumped-up fighters (in this case from the sports arena rather than the battlefield) were paraded for its ruler's delectation. We do not know if the 'tall

fellows' of the East German athletics team were marched through Ulbricht's bedroom, with the Communist leader in the voyeuristic role of the order-besotted 'soldier king' Frederick Wilhelm I. But since 13 August 1961 there was a wall around the city of Berlin once more – from which in the twentieth century 'deserters' would be shot while trying to escape, just as they had been in the eighteenth.

It would be for Ulbricht's successor to take the next logical step and re-introduce a cult of Prussia and Frederick the Great to provide some desperately needed historical backbone to the GDR. For East Germany's stubborn, squeaky-voiced creator, it was perhaps enough to have survived and fashioned, at whatever cost to its inhabitants, an entity that reflected what he had been dreaming of since his fevered, working-class adolescence back in imperial German Leipzig.

Ulbricht was removed from real power in the East German state at the age of seventy-seven, in May 1971. Leonid Brezhnev, Khrushchev's dour successor as leader of the Soviet Union, had decided that his German satellite needed new blood at the top.

Ulbricht lived on for a little more than two years, his health slowly failing, still left with the title of president of the Council of State, but bereft of the power he had once wielded. He was not even allowed to choose his own visitors, who were selected by the Politburo's protocol department.

A photograph of the celebrations for Ulbricht's last birthday, in June 1973, shows the visibly aged former strongman of German Communism at eighty. The venue is the banqueting hall of the Council of State building. He crouches in a chair from which he is unable to rise, due to infirmity. His gaze is levelled downwards. His successor, Erich Honecker, stands at a microphone reading from a commemorative album, while behind Honecker the members of the Politburo loom impassively in their ill-fitting, buttoned-up suits. This is a tedious duty call for them. So far as can be seen, there is no other audience to the event. The faint rictus playing on the prone former leader's face may express physical pain. Equally, it may express the frustration and anger of a decaying, once-mighty animal reduced to helpless dependency on creatures he once despised. If Ulbricht had the strength, perhaps he would tear all their throats out. But he does not and cannot.

Walter Ulbricht died five weeks later, on 1 August 1973, at his lakeside house on the Döllnsee. It was here, twelve years before, that he had invited his underlings to take tea with him and pay him obeisance, the day before the Berlin Wall was built.