



# Postwar Berlin

For conflict archaeologist **Matt Leonard**, postwar Berlin, with a fortified Cold War front-line running through the middle, can be studied as a 'battlefield' just like the Somme or the Normandy beaches.



**Main image** A memorial of over 1,000 crosses for those who died trying to cross the Berlin Wall. The memorial stood for ten months between 2004 and 2005, when it was removed.

**B**erlin has a rich, complex, and turbulent history, and it could be argued that there has always been a 'wall' of sorts running through it, splitting the city culturally, socially, and politically. For most of the second half of the 20th century, Berlin was the frontline of the Cold War, the divide between East and West, and a battlefield that was as real as the Somme in 1916 or the Normandy beaches of 1944.

This conflict was not waged through sweeping military manoeuvres, pitched battles, and horrific casualties – though the threat was always there. Rather, it was fought with ideology, segregation, and fear. The Berlin Wall was as much a weapon as the bullet or artillery shell, and the wounds it inflicted still run deep today.

As it rebuilds itself into a 21st century city, Berlin is trying to come to terms with its past. The Wall's imposition on the city for over 28 years meant that the physical and spiritual rebuilding after the Second World War took far longer than it should have. The

Wall went up overnight, forming an instant conflict landscape that was both localised and global. It was immediately contested by rival cultural and political

philosophies, which came to dominate the collective consciousness of people on either side of the divide, and radically altered the development of the city.

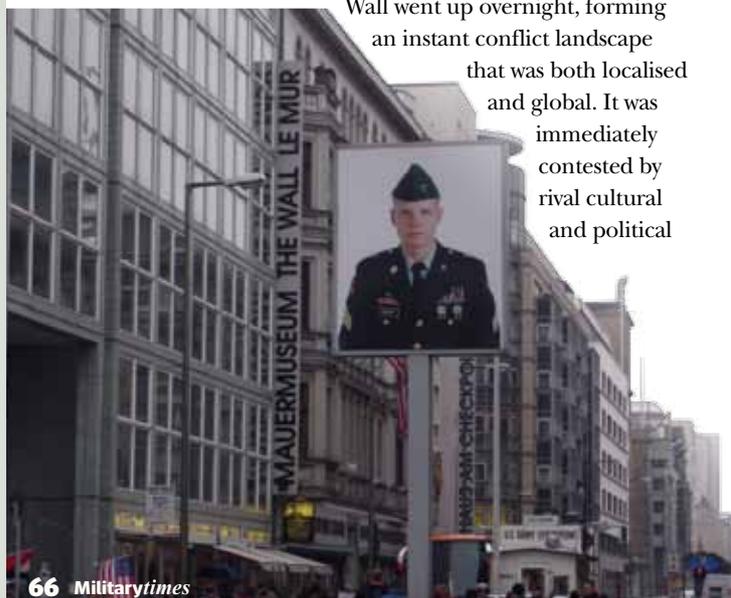
## Death strip

The Wall's sheer size meant that huge swathes of the city were either destroyed or incorporated to support it, creating a yawning void in the urban fabric, one that Berlin is still battling to fill today. In places, streets such as *Bernauer Strasse* formed the divide, with the buildings in the East and the pavement outside in the West. In other areas, gravestones were torn up from cemeteries and used to pave the patrol lanes inside the Death Strip: the markers of the dead used to pave the way for the death of many more.

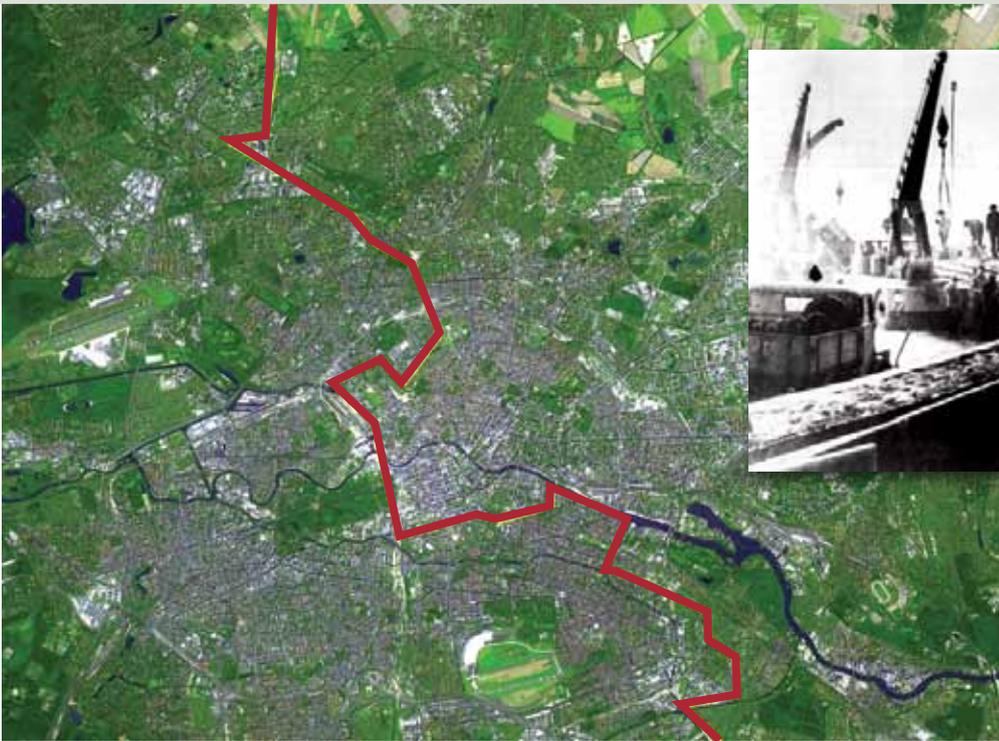
Modern conflict creates as well as destroys, and a great deal of Berlin's architecture is a direct result of the city's division. In the west of the city, there is Devil's Mountain, the highest point in Berlin and made entirely made from rubble of the Second World War. Used as a listening post by the West for most of the Cold War, it was capable of hearing conversations hundreds of miles away. In the east of the city, the 365m-tall TV tower, built by the GDR as a symbol of Communism, still looms over the city today.

For all the creation, there was also destruction that permanently altered the city's landscape. Renowned landmarks such as the Berlin City Castle and the Church of the Reconciliation were torn down for purely ideological reasons. In the case of the church, a house of God marooned for 24 years in the Death Strip was destroyed by the GDR in front of the world's media.

Ostensibly, this was done for security, but in reality it was a statement of political will. This was modern conflict being waged on a global scale, and the church's destruction, witnessed on television all



**Left** The museum of the Berlin Wall, located just behind Checkpoint Charlie.



Above Satellite image of Berlin, Germany. The red line marks where the Berlin Wall once stood.



Above A remaining symbol of Communism, the 365m-high TV Tower still looms over the east side of Berlin.

over the world, was seen as a gross violation of hope, architecture, and religion by a system widely perceived to be corrupt and inhumane.

### Nazi past

Perhaps the biggest drama to have been played out on the city's stage involves Germany's battle with fascism. The evidence of its Nazi past is everywhere; from the imposing ministerial buildings and the bullet-scarred architecture, to the secret torture chambers and scenes of executions – now so often just anonymous shops on the side streets of the city. The major sites of Nazi aggression and defiance were represented in different ways. The eastern side focused on victory over the Nazis, while in the West attention was on the Nazi horrors and coming to terms with them.

These differing approaches, that were played out right across the city, can be seen at *Bebelplatz*, where on 10 May 1933, fuelled by huge crowds and a rousing speech by Goebbels, the notorious 'burning of the books' took place. After the war, the significance of the site was forgotten and it became a desolate public car-park. Eventually, public pressure began to grow for a memorial, and the GDR, keen to remind the world of the great communist victory over the Nazis, planned a giant, bronze heroic statue for the square.

Then the Wall came down. The plans were scrapped, and only in 1995 was a final memorial chosen. It consisted of a subterranean room covered in bare shelves, where 20,000 books could have sat if they had not been destroyed. All that is visible from the street is an understated viewing glass set into the ground. It is a far cry from a giant statue proclaiming glory and victory.

### Wall as weapon

The Berlin Wall was a weapon that altered mental as well as physical landscapes. To those in the East, ideas of capitalism and democracy were literally blocked from view, erased from their minds and portrayed as corrupt and unworkable. To those in the West, the idea of Communism was constructed by what could not be seen in the East, by rumour, propaganda, and fear.

This barrier to understanding helped to fuel the suspicion and distrust that powered the Cold War. Kennedy

famously said, 'All free men, wherever they may live, are citizens of Berlin', and in saying that, he, like many others, used the city as a weapon with which to prosecute the Cold War. Berlin was a contested landscape in the middle of a far wider conflict, and stands as an example of the complexity of modern war.

Today, there is a rise in nostalgia for the GDR. As recession grips Europe and capitalism struggles to take root in the East, the persecution and loss of liberty that the Berlin Wall ensured is being marginalised, helped by the disappearance of the Wall's last traces. With Berlin's rich and complex history of division, the question remains as to whether it will be able to heal its 20th century wounds before the next physical or figurative wall is built on this notorious 20th century battlefield. [Mr](#)

