

# Voices Of The Berlin Wall - The Cold War

---

 [iwm.org.uk/history/voices-of-the-wall](http://iwm.org.uk/history/voices-of-the-wall)

To mark the fall of the Berlin Wall, IWM is sharing the story of the wall and those who lived and worked alongside it.

Here we feature five people's memories of the wall - share yours with us on Twitter using the hashtag #VoicesOfTheWall.

## *The Soldiers*

---



© IWM HU 73012

In this photograph, construction workers are supervised by East German guards as they build part of the Berlin Wall in 1961.

Eric Basil Burini and Frank Brannigan both served with the 1st Battalion The Durham Light Infantry in 1961, when construction on the wall began. They both shared their memories of their service in oral history recordings, now held in IWM's collections.

Eric recalled: 'I got an urgent message from the Commanding Officer - 'pack everything up and go straight down to the Tiergarten' - because there was something going on, on the other side. And it turned out they were building the wall. It was a temporary affair to start with, barbed wire and that sort of thing.'

Frank remembered seeing people trying to cross the barrier that had now started to divide Berlin.

'We seen 'em trying to get through the barbed wire and getting shot. I mean, you see [them] asking you for help and you couldn't help them....Families were split up overnight and you've got them trying to jump over...'

## ***The Child***

---



© Brian Wehner from IWM photo archive, HU 140187

Brian Wehner awaits his turn to observe East Berlin from a viewing platform in the French sector of West Berlin circa 1963. A small sign on the platform warns that unauthorised personnel are forbidden from proceeding any further.

Brian Wehner was 7 years old when he arrived in Berlin with his parents Nadine and Arthur Ward Wehner. His father was a United States Air Force pilot and the family settled in the American sector in the early 1960s.

They were there in 1962 during the Cuban Missile Crisis – although it was one of the hottest moments in the Cold War, Brian’s parents protected him from news of the tense standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union.

The presence of the Berlin Wall and the guards patrolling it was something Brian accepted but was something that was ‘very intimidating at the time for a little guy’.



© Brian Wehner from IWM photo archive, HU 140198

View of the wall as seen from the American sector, looking towards the Brandenburg Gate, where an East German guard patrols in the background.

'I knew that it was a bad thing because people were dying trying to get to the West and it was formidable because you saw guards, you saw machine guns, you saw barbed wire, anti-tank devices....I knew it was not good.'

By the time the Berlin Wall fell, Brian had returned home to the United States – looking back at the fall of the wall, he says he is glad that 'freedom prevailed'.

## ***The Artist***

---



© Courtesy of Thierry Noir

Thierry Noir stood by the Berlin Wall in the 1980s.

Thierry Noir was an artist who painted on the Berlin Wall in the 1980s. He was in Berlin when the wall fell in November 1989.

'When the wall came down in November 9th, I was on the way back home in my car suddenly I saw a huge traffic mess so I left the car somewhere and I walked in the direction of Checkpoint Charlie and I saw it was a big confusion, with thousands of people on both sides of the wall, crying, and laughing at the same time and then suddenly the doors opened and then thousands of people from the east came for the first time to the west. It was one of the most emotional days of my life.'

To mark the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, Thierry collaborated on a new artwork with street artist STIK. Find out more about how they worked together to create *Wall* which stood outside IWM London in 2019.

## ***The Journalist***

---



Headshot of journalist David Loyn in East Germany.

‘An important thing to get across was how much of a threat people believed the Communist Parties of Eastern Europe to be at the time. There was no sense in 1989 that in the next few years the Communist Party of Russia would have folded up completely, that we would be seeing the rise of Gorbachev and perestroika.’

Journalist and [IWM Associate](#) David Loyn was sent to East Germany when a BBC colleague fell ill – as a result, he ended up covering the protests that led up to the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989.

‘They were chanting ‘wir sind das Volk’ [we are the people], in response to the way in which the East German government had suborned public institutions and claimed authority over people, with the creation of organisations like the Volkspolizei. They were reclaiming that from the state. ‘You’re not the people, we’re the people.’

The footage was taken back through Checkpoint Charlie and transmitted to London, with David filing his voiceover from a telephone box in East Berlin.

The fall of the wall would change Europe – but at the time, David recalls there was ‘a great deal of uncertainty about what it meant’.

‘Standing on the affluent streets of West Berlin, surrounded by people in furs essentially, meeting their counterparts in tie-dyed jeans. It was like two different species encountering each other for the first time. There was a great deal of curiosity, I mean they would have been shot for crossing over the border previously and now they were free to do so.’

‘There was a sense that this was a defining moment, something historical.’

---

## **What was the *Berlin Wall* and how did it fall?**

---

The Berlin Wall came to represent the ideological divisions of the Cold War. At the end of the Second World War, Germany was divided into four zones of occupation under the control of the United States, Britain, France and the Soviet Union. Berlin, although located within the Soviet zone, was also split amongst the four powers.




© IWM (NAT 3544)

---

# Living in a Divided City: West-Berlin

---

 [visitberlin.de/en/living-divided-city-west-berlin](https://www.visitberlin.de/en/living-divided-city-west-berlin)



## Memorial sites and monuments

From 1961 to 1989, the Berlin Wall divided the city, with its western part completely surrounded by the Wall. The result was a historical oddity, a city with a special political status that resulted in a very unique way of life. The name alone is problematic, at least in German: officially, it was known as Berlin (West); the East Germans, if they referred to it at all, wrote it as Westberlin; whilst in West Germany, they wrote it with a hyphen in German: West-Berlin. As you can see, even the spelling was a political matter. West Berlin consisted of the present-day districts of Tiergarten, Kreuzberg, Charlottenburg, Wilmersdorf, Reinickendorf, Spandau Steglitz-Zehlendorf, Neukölln, Schöneberg, Tempelhof and Wedding.

## **Special Political Status: Life under Division and Occupation**

---

Even if West Berlin's Senate took care of day-to-day business for the part from 1950, West Berlin retained a special political status until German reunification in 1990 because technically, West Berlin was not a part of any state. Though the city as a whole was initially governed by a Four Power Allied Control Council with a leadership that rotated monthly, the Soviets withdrew from the council as East-West relations deteriorated and began governing their sector independently. The council continued to govern West Berlin, with the same rotating leadership policy, though now only involving France, Great Britain, and the United States. West Berlin was divided into three sectors with the Americans in the south, the French in the north and the British in the west. And the Allies made their presence felt across the city: streets were named, for example, Avenue Charles-de-Gaulle, there were shops and cinemas exclusively for members of the Allied forces (for example at Truman Plaza in Zehlendorf). And in summer, American and French festivals were also celebrated, with typical specialties such as burgers or merguez being served. The special status of the city was also evident by the fact that West Berliners did not carry West German identity cards but instead temporary ID cards with green instead of grey covers. Also, unlike in the Federal

Republic, there was **no mandatory military service**, a fact which made West Berlin a magnet for many conscientious objectors, and no mandatory closing times for bars, which led to a thriving nightlife.

## **The Wall in the Cityscape**

---

The wall divided the city, cutting across streets and squares. In urban districts such as Kreuzberg, the Wall would run directly on the streets or along rows of houses. The Wall also stood directly behind the Reichstag and then went in an arc around the Brandenburg Gate, which was marooned in the middle of no-man's land. Waterways such as the River Spree were off limits because they also belonged to the territory of the GDR. As a result, several children drowned in Berlin waters because they could not be saved from the western side; later, special emergency phones were installed. Over the years, the West Berlin learned to live with the Wall, painting it with colourful graffiti and accepting it as just a part of everyday life in a divided city.

## **“Ich bin ein Berliner:” Life with the Allies**

---

After the currency reform of 1948, Soviet troops sealed off West Berlin in a bid to secure economic and thus political control over all of Berlin. The American and British occupiers then began an airlift of food and coal to secure the survival of West Berlin until the end of the blockade. The West Berliners nicknamed the Allied planes the “Rosinenbomber” (“raisin bombers”), since soldiers would drop sweets with very small parachutes to the ground to the delight of Berlin's children. On 26 June 1963, almost two years after the Wall was built, American President John F. Kennedy visited the city and held what was to become one of his most famous speeches in front of the Schöneberg Town Hall, where he proclaimed **“Ich bin ein Berliner”**. For the Berliners who had felt abandoned by the Allies and the German government (as then-Chancellor Konrad Adenauer took days to come to the city after the Wall had been built) these words were a true refreshment. Years later, towards the end of the Cold War, U.S. President Ronald Reagan held a speech at the Brandenburg Gate and famously demanded of Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev: **“Tear down this wall”**. By this time, however, the city, many of its inhabitants and their relationship with the Americans had changed. Reagan's visit was greeted with enthusiasm by some, but also by demonstrations and a healthy dose of scepticism.

## **The islanders don't want to give up their peaceful existence**

---

For many West Berliners after the blockade and then the construction of the Wall thirteen years later, there was an island mentality, as West Berlin was seen as an island in a red sea of communism and the last bastion of Western values. Typical proof of this special brand of local patriotism was found in the song “Der Insulaner verliert die Ruhe nicht” (“The islanders don't want to give up their peaceful existence”) on West Berlin radio station RIAS. Part of this defiant persistence was also a conscientious rejection of the offers of the East German

government. As a result, during the blockade and later, many refused to make purchases from East Berlin shops. Some people would not even use the S-Bahn, since it was run by the East Berlin government.

## Period of Unrest

---

In the late 60s and 70s, West Berlin was one of the strongholds of the student movement against the rigid structures of post-war society. The Vietnam War led many students to adopt a critical attitude against America which stood in sharp contrast to older West Berliners who tended to see the Allies as friends and protectors. Besides politics, the younger generation questioned the ways of private life and tried new ways. For example, Kommune 1 was founded to try to find new ways of living together. When the Senate wanted to demolish old buildings especially in Kreuzberg to make way for new high-rise buildings and wide boulevards, the houses were occupied to prevent their demolition. There were repeated clashes with the police. Over the years, many of the squatters became owners and began renovating the flats and houses. West Berlin gained notoriety as a drug capital with the 1978 publication of “Wir Kinder vom Bahnhof Zoo” (“We Children from Bahnhof Zoo”) by Christiane F. The book, made in 1981 into a film known as “Christiane F.” in English, showed the dark side of drug use, crime and prostitution under the glittering surface of the island of West Berlin.

## Artists and the art of living

---

The artistic life flourished in West Berlin. The bourgeois district of Friedenau was well known as the home of authors such as Günter Grass and Uwe Johnson. Theatres such as the Schaubühne put on experimental pieces and created new approaches to stage productions. Many people moved to West Berlin from towns in the West that they found to be too stuffy and cramped and pursued alternative lifestyles that would have been unthinkable elsewhere in West Germany. A typical model of such alternative living was (and is) the ufaFabrik with its many cultural projects in Tempelhof. Juppy, one of its residents, has gained great notoriety well beyond Berlin.

## Berlin Originals

---

It's now gone, but for years even after reunification, well-known German comedian and actor **Harald Juhnke** could be seen smiling from a now legendary advertising image for a Chinese restaurant. Harald Juhnke was one of the typical West Berlin celebrities in German film and television that shaped the image of the city, although in a very different way from Rio Reiser and David Bowie. These included Edith Hancke, Brigitte Mira, Hans Rosenthal and, of course, Rolf Eden. Then there were those that everyone knew when they saw them, even if they didn't know their names, for example, Tüten-Paula, a homeless woman living on Kurfürstendamm or the activist who would present her theories about peace with catchy slogans to a rather astonished audience.

## Heroes: Berlin's music scene

---

There's hardly anything else for which West Berlin is still well known as its vibrant music scene and subculture because, unlike in West German cities, there was no curfew. People went out all night to Dschungel, Risiko, SO 36, Shizzo, Penny Lane, Anderes Ufer, Frontkino, Ex'n'Pop, Kumpelnest 3000. Youth from suburban Berlin also liked to visit Linientreu, Riverboat, Meadow and Big Eden, that later on mostly attracted tourists. The flamboyant star was **David Bowie**, who lived on Schöneberger Hauptstraße from 1976 to 1978 and recorded his legendary Heroes album in Berlin's Hansa-Studios. He also worked with Iggy Pop, who lived in the same house, to record the albums The Idiot and Lust for Life. Depeche Mode's album Some Great Reward was recorded at Hansa Studios in 1984.

## Kreuzberg

---

The most famous district of West Berlin was and still is Kreuzberg, which was often seen as typical of the whole of Berlin. Kreuzberg, directly affected by the course of the Wall and pushed to the edge of eastern edge of West Berlin, was formerly a working class district with many, often ramshackle old buildings. It became a magnet for artists and students looking for alternative lifestyles. In addition, many migrants, mostly from Turkey, moved to Kreuzberg, which soon got the nickname "Little Istanbul".

## West Berlin Today

---

With the fall of the Berlin Wall, not only did East Germany but also the old West Berlin disappear. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the night-life scene shifted to the east, where new clubs emerged with new styles of music. Meanwhile, the renaissance of the newly dubbed City West has begun. With the renovated BIKINI Berlin and Zoo Palast, the Cumberlandhaus and numerous new businesses, Kurfürstendamm is quickly regaining its gloss.