

Chapter 34

The Berlin Wall Trail: A Cycling and Hiking Route on the Traces of Berlin's East–West Division During the Cold War

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Abstract In this final short chapter, European Parliament Member Michael Cramer describes the greening of the Berlin Wall. Working together, citizen volunteers, NGOs, and governments have transformed the former ‘death strip’, a dramatic and enduring symbol of the divisions brought about by the Cold War, into a site of natural beauty and reconciliation. The Berlin Wall may well be one of the most emotion-charged structures built in the twentieth century. Not only did it cleave one of Europe’s great capitals in two – the Wall stood as a concrete symbol of the world’s division into two opposing blocs. Today its remnants remain a memorial against violence, tyranny and the abuse of power, and as a warning to future generations never to forget the price Europe paid for its Cold War division. The Berlin Wall Trail, a cycle trail running along the former division line, presents an excellent combination of history workshop and bicycle tourism, green urbanism, recreation and culture. The trail serves as a reminder of the city’s division, and its reunification, stressing the importance of sustainable (urban) mobility and community involvement in greening.

Keywords Sustainable mobility • Active memorial • Berlin wall • Green urbanism • Recreation and culture

The Berlin Wall may well be one of the most emotion-charged structures of the twentieth century. Not only did it cleave one of Europe’s great capitals in two, it also stood as a concrete symbol of the world’s division into two opposing blocs. Today its remnants stand as a memorial against violence, tyranny and the abuse of

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power, and as a warning to future generations never to forget the price Europe paid for its Cold War divisions. A bicycle and hiking trail running along its length, the Berlin Wall today is a genuine ride or walk through history, culture, nature and politics.

From a Death Strip to Urban Greening

After the fall of Communism, citizens groups, teachers, environmentalists, and young people joined in transforming the Cold War symbol of death into an urban green corridor. One such group, the Teltower Slab Environmental Initiative, planted hedges and fruit trees and cleaned-up Hertha Pond. Germans were supported in their efforts by the Japanese, who presented 800 cherry trees to the German people for planting along the Wall 'out of joy over the German reunification' (Fig. 34.1).

Whereas after the end of the Cold War, many people simply wanted to forget the division of Berlin and erase all of its traces, some Germans understood the importance of remembering rather than repressing their history. Teachers Marian Przybilla and Helga Garduhn, together with their students and local residents, campaigned successfully to stop the Wall's border tower from being torn down and to ensure that natural habitats were restored around the tower. This campaign also resulted in over 80,000 trees being planted in the border strip (Figs. 34.2 and 34.3).



Fig. 34.1 Cherry trees in the former border strip in Lichterfelde-Süd. Thanks to the greening efforts of citizens groups, today's young Berliners can cycle through history and nature



Fig. 34.2 Deutsche Waldjugend guard tower in 1989. In order for the guards to have a clear line of sight in which to fire their weapons, the border strip was leveled



Fig. 34.3 Deutsche Waldjugend guard tower in 2002. Two teachers from East and West Berlin were recognized for their work to preserve the Tower by the German Federal Cross of Merit. A sign on the tower reads: 'A tower you can touch. After ten years the one-time death-zone has turned into an oasis'

Experiencing the Berlin Wall Today

When people talk about the Berlin Wall, they usually mean the 40-km border that ran through the middle of the city, dividing it into East and West Berlin. In fact, the Berlin Wall was much longer and includes the 120-km long border between West Berlin and -what is today- the surrounding state of Brandenburg .

Today, the rural stretch of the Trail winds through pleasant countryside and woods, and can readily be explored by bicycle. It takes one to the longest remnants of the original Wall, the 1,300-m 'East-Side-Gallery', and to Bernauer Straße, where the 1.5-km long central memorial stretches out over a wide area. There you can see the old path of the soldiers in the death strip, a watch tower, an information center, and a wonderful new park occupying the site of the old train station.

Along the Trail one also discovers past oddities like the ice cellar in Spandau; the border crossing at Staaken; or Wall Park, an enclave surrounded on three sides by the Wall where people congregate for music, parties, and flea markets on weekends. You can feel a breath of Cold War intrigue at Glienicker Bridge, where the occupying powers traded captured spies on fog-shrouded nights, or examine the remains of the largest border crossing complex, the Dreilinden Autobahn entrance to Berlin, which is now preserved as an historic site.

To commemorate the 40th anniversary of the Wall's construction in 2001, I began to lead guided bicycle rides along the Wall. The public reaction to these tours was very positive, and prompted the city government to put all remaining traces of the Wall under historic preservation status, as well as to build a bicycle-friendly marked trail the length of the one-time border. A published guide to the Trail helps bicyclists as well as hikers experience their conflicted history.

Today, the 160-km route consists of 19 sections, each of which begins and ends at a public transport station. Bicycles may be transported on all regional public transport. Thus, in addition to serving as a reminder of Berlin's division and its peaceful reunification, the Trail also is a demonstration of sustainable urban transportation.

Connecting East and West: A Sustainable Vision for the Future

The current state of the former border strip sharply contrasts with its appearance during the Cold War. Where once the grey Wall with its barbwire and sentinels stood, today there is a corridor of paths and green parks. The gradual greening of the former division line plays an essential role through its integration of history, green urbanism, recreation, and culture. It is not only a symbol of Berlin's transformation, but also helps Berliners reintegrate what could have become a waste area into the city, as a living space and connecting element between East and West. The trail contributes to overcoming the painful past of Berlin, without merely forgetting history. Moreover, by fostering sustainable transport such as

cycling and walking, it also enhances the health of the inhabitants. Finally, the Berlin Wall Trail has become one of the most appealing assets for tourism in Berlin, combining leisure with a city tour.

The Berlin Wall Trail proves that past and future can meet in a way that helps overcome former divisions and sustains the ecological transformation of our cities. The transformation of the land occupied by the former death strip helps to heal the scars of the past and to remember the overcoming of division through the peaceful revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe. The Trail represents not only a source of healing through greening of a formerly highly fortified site, but also an attractive and sustainable vision for the future.