



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at the central commemorative event to mark the
60th anniversary of the construction of the Berlin Wall
on 13 August 2021
in Berlin**

On 13 August 1961, the worst fears of many people in Berlin, of many Germans and of the politically astute the world over were realised. The Iron Curtain that divided Berlin, Germany, Europe and the world had closed completely, and no-one knew for how long. That day – 13 August 1961 – was a fateful day for us Germans and for the world – a day that shattered dreams and hopes, that separated children from parents, grandchildren from grandparents, that tore starkly and painfully into the lives of countless individuals.

The Berlin Wall literally cemented the division of the Cold War world. But, as this barrier ran right through the heart of a living city, arbitrarily dividing streets and pathways, squares and railway lines, rivers and cemeteries, everyone could see just how violent and inhumane this division was.

The central point of this closed border was, of all things, a gateway – since ancient times the symbol of free access, of freedom of movement, of encounter, of coming and going from here to there. This gateway, the Brandenburg Gate, thus became not only the symbol of Berlin's painful division, but also the global symbol of the suppression of freedom – and of the desire for this stolen freedom. When President Kennedy visited Berlin, the powers-that-be in East Berlin had hung red cloth in its portals: there was not even to be the possibility of catching a glimpse from here to there.

"Nobody has any intention of building a wall." The vast majority of us are familiar with this sentence, which has gone down in German history as one of the most blatant lies ever. Perhaps, when it was formulated, no final decision had yet been taken on when or how exactly to impassably divide Berlin and thus Germany. But there can be absolutely no doubt that the regime in East Berlin had long been firmly

resolved to put a stop to the exodus of so many people from the GDR at its most sensitive point, namely Berlin.

In the beginning was the lie – and it persisted in the term “anti-fascist protective wall”. Who ever believed this propaganda lie? That Wall was not built in order to prevent the arrival of conquering hordes from the West. No, it was built by a state that had to shut its own citizens inside the country so as to be able to function at all for a while longer.

The Berlin Wall, the construction of which was intended to appear like a sovereign act by a state determined on nothing more than achieving international recognition was in reality an admission that not even the state’s own citizens truly recognised it.

The construction of the Wall – no matter how effective it was in stabilising the status quo, as it was called, for twenty-eight years – bore witness to hopeless failure. The Wall was the undeniable symbol of a totalitarian state which, in the eyes of its own citizens, was neither sovereign nor legitimate. Basically it was the beginning of the end – though the end was still far too long in coming.

Over the course of those twenty-eight years, the Wall brought immeasurable suffering to the people. It split up families; it broke apart friendships; it made encounters impossible.

Virtually no-one illustrated this better than the great and rebellious poet Wolf Biermann. Biermann had believed for so long in the possibilities of socialism and did not want to leave his country, until finally he was stripped of his citizenship. A photographer posed him in the middle of Weidendamm bridge, standing in front of the wrought-iron Prussian eagle. It looked as though Biermann had sprouted wings. And so, voicing the feelings of all who longed for freedom, he penned the “Ballad of the Prussian Icarus”:

“The barbed wire grows slowly inward
deep into the skin, into the chest and legs,
into the brain, into its grey cells.
Girded by a wire band,
our country is an island
pounded by leaden waves.

There stands the Prussian Icarus
with grey wings made of wrought iron.
His arms are so, so painful...”

Even though the border was becoming more and more impermeable, many people were drawn to freedom. But many escape attempts ended in death, with those fleeing being killed either by the border guards’ guns or during their desperate attempt to flee across the Baltic Sea. Many were caught and imprisoned. In recalling the building of the Wall today, we also remember the dead and injured, and the detained – all those who risked their lives in pursuit of freedom.

Today, the Wall has all but disappeared from Berlin's cityscape. Parts of it stand in cities around the globe, reminding the whole world of this dark chapter in German-German history, indeed in world history. And nowadays we take it for granted that we can walk the few steps from one side of bustling Potsdamer Platz to the other, scarcely noticing the narrow strip of cobblestones on its eastern side tracing the former route of the Wall.

And yet, if we are truly to appreciate the freedom that allows us to take these few steps, then we must remember the time, which to many appeared unending, when the Wall blocked the road to freedom for the people of East Berlin, when – as Biermann put it – the barbed wire slowly grew inward, “deep into the skin, into the chest and legs”. When we celebrate the fall of the Wall on 9 November, the spring in the middle of the cold autumn, then we must also remember 13 August, the start of an ice age in the midst of summer.

And what about the people of West Berlin? For them, 13 August 1961 heralded a new time of fear. They were living in the political and cultural freedom of the Western democracies and in some respects in a testing ground for entirely new political and social freedoms. But they were living on a walled-in, fenced-in island and could never be certain of how long they would retain this freedom. Even if they did not see the Wall every day, it was nonetheless omnipresent.

“How often did I see it until finally I saw it no more [...]:
guard towers, crosses, withered wreaths across the city,
that was my Berlin,”

sang Reinhard Mey, another son of Berlin.

Freedom and security were always in jeopardy in West Berlin. To this day, we are grateful to our friends and allies, the Americans, the British and the French, for helping to protect this freedom through their presence and through the presence of their soldiers.

And we are grateful to all who brought down the Wall after twenty-eight years – those whose courage made possible the Peaceful Revolution, the thousands who correctly misunderstood Günter Schabowski on 9 November and peacefully forced their way to the other half of their city. None of us have forgotten their courage – or their defiant insouciance on that incomparable night.

But today we can also be thankful to all those who had long been working to facilitate the peaceful transition to a new era of freedom through their policies of détente and confidence-building measures. It is no coincidence that Willy Brandt and Egon Bahr garnered their fundamental political experiences against the backdrop of the Wall. And Ronald Reagan knew what he was doing in addressing Mikhail Gorbachev directly, calling on him to open the Brandenburg Gate and tear down the Wall, rather than the powerholders in East Berlin, who had long been on

their last legs. And Gorbachev could trust that Helmut Kohl's Germany would be and would remain a peaceful state at the heart of Europe.

Remembrance of the Berlin Wall must not stop at recollection. It is a continuing challenge for us, both today and tomorrow. Freedom and democracy are never nature's gift, never achieved once and for all. Freedom and democracy must be fought for, but subsequently also protected, defended and preserved. Freedom and democracy need resolute engagement and passion. This starts with voting in democratic elections, elections which the Wall and all it stood for denied to many for so long. I ask all of you to think about that when a new Bundestag is elected soon.

On 13 August 1961, no-one could yet have predicted how history would unfold. The people of West Berlin could not know whether their stamina, their optimism, unshakeable in spite of everything, would really stand the test of time. The people of East Berlin could not know whether they would ever again be able to go without harassment to visit family or friends in the Schöneberg district, stroll along the Ku'damm or dive into the Wannsee.

It is in the everyday that we live out and want to live out our freedom in peace. What we want is nothing more than the very ordinary pleasure of coming and going, of living where and how we like.

However, one date is a reminder that those ordinary pleasures we take for granted do not come about by themselves, that we must all play our part in preserving and protecting them, that history, both good and evil, is made by us human beings – 13 August.

13 August here in the heart of Berlin.