



Introduction: The Berlin Wall and German Historical Memory

Thirty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989, people around the world still remember the joyous drama of that night and the days and nights that followed. Even at a time before smartphones and Twitter helped people experience an event together, the surprise opening of the Berlin Wall was viewed by millions on television sets and splashed across headlines around the globe. For Berliners and Germans, dramatic days followed that would change their lives and their country.

When the Wall fell, nineteen-year-old Georg¹ had just begun his compulsory military service in the National People's Army (NVA). Born and raised in a small town in East Germany where he had learned how to milk cows at a collective farm, he was assigned for his eighteen-month service to the one unit of the NVA based in East Berlin, the Friedrich Engels Guard Regiment. The regiment's duties were to stand guard at the central Monument to Victims of Fascism and Militarism (the *Neue Wache* on the main thoroughfare of the city, Unter den Linden) and at military installations in East Berlin, as well as to serve as the honor guard at official state visits. Georg just wanted to get his military service done as soon as possible without any problems and go on with his life. Yet, now, in the early days of November, living at the regimental barracks in the heart of East Berlin, just blocks from the Berlin Wall and the Brandenburg Gate, he could hear the shouts of demonstrators on the streets outside and grew increasingly anxious.

The young draftee and his colleagues were given no information about what was going on and were not allowed to read the newspapers or listen to the radio. They were not armed with guns nor had they been trained to use firearms, although they had been trained to march with goose steps in front of the *Neue Wache*. The only people in the unit who had access to a radio were those on duty on each floor of the barracks. As fate would have it, Georg had floor duty on the night of November 9, his ninth day in the army.

¹ Georg's name has been changed to grant him anonymity. Interviews with author, November 9, 2014 and June 25, 2018. All translations from German to English in this book have been done by the author.

Early that evening, before Georg was sitting by the radio, Politburo member Günter Schabowski had declared at a press conference that there were new regulations for travel to the West. These had previously been extremely restrictive for people of working age, generally granting permission to travel to West Berlin or West Germany only for the funerals, weddings, or major birthdays of close family members; one of the many points of complaint of increasingly large groups of East German protestors. Schabowski announced that the regime was now considering allowing East German citizens to “travel wherever they want to” without the previously necessary justifications and also that they had just decided earlier that day that people who wanted to “permanently leave” the GDR could now do so at any border crossing point, including in Berlin. The new regulations for those seeking to emigrate would take effect “immediately, without delay,” in Schabowski’s memorable words. The fact that Schabowski had misread his briefing documents and that, actually, the borders were not supposed to be totally open and people still needed to obtain a visa to leave, was lost.²

Georg had heard rumors in the barracks about Schabowski’s press conference and remained at his floor post by the radio listening closely, with some confusion and growing trepidation. As the evening wore on, he heard reports that his fellow East German citizens were making their way to checkpoints on the border in droves and that, as of around 11:30 p.m., the first border crossing at the Berlin Wall was opened to free movement at Bornholmer Strasse, less than three miles directly north of where he was sitting.³ The nineteen year old grew increasingly worried, wondering, “Holy shit, what kind of a situation will I be in now?” Just after midnight, the East German authorities gave in to the crush of their citizens at the border and opened all the checkpoints to West Berlin (Figure 1). Two of the checkpoints, at Invalidenstrasse and at Checkpoint Charlie, were just over a mile away from Georg’s barracks, to the northwest and southwest respectively. In the dark early morning hours, Georg and his regiment were given orders to prepare to move out. They were armed with batons and packed onto trucks. They had no idea where they were going, nor what their mission would be on this dark, cold November night. Would they be ordered to use force against their fellow citizens? Would they be attacked by their fellow citizens for representing the East German authorities, Georg worried.

² Hans-Hermann Hertle, “The Fall of the Wall: The Unintended Dissolution of East Germany’s Ruling Regime,” *Bulletin 12/13*, Cold War International History Project (Fall/Winter 2001), pp. 131–40. See also Mary Elise Sarotte, *The Collapse: The Accidental Opening of the Berlin Wall* (New York: Basic Books, 2014).

³ For a description of the events at Bornholmer Strasse through the eyes of Harald Jäger, the leader at the East German checkpoint for the key hours, see Gerhard Haase-Hindenberg, *Der Mann, der die Mauer öffnete: Warum Oberstleutnant Harald Jäger den Befehl verweigert und damit Weltgeschichte schrieb* (Munich: Wilhelm Heyne Verlag, 2007). See also Sarotte, *The Collapse*, pp. 136–47.

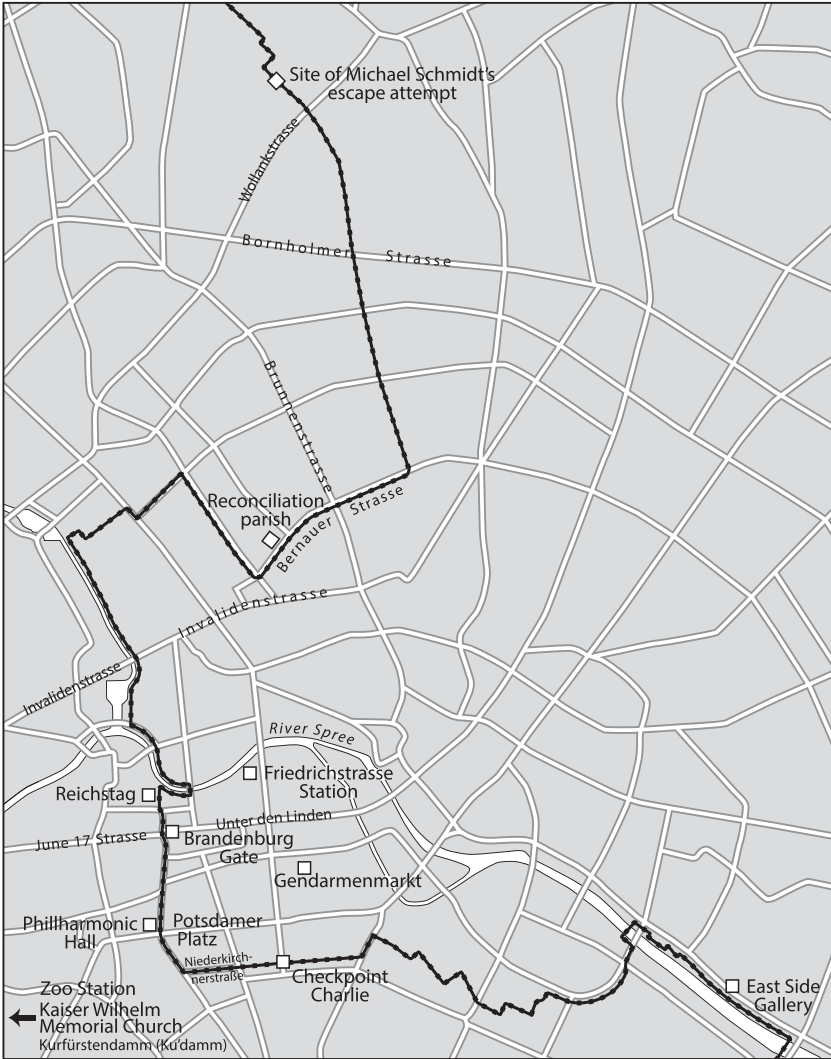


Figure 1 Central path of Wall with checkpoints and key sites

He did not have to wonder for long about where they were headed as the trucks stopped less than a mile later in front of the Brandenburg Gate – or, from the western perspective, behind the Gate. They were ordered to form a human chain just in front of the eastern fence marking the perimeter of the Berlin Wall restricted zone. Georg and the other new draftees had not even

taken the military oath yet, and they were suddenly deployed at the front line in Berlin at the greatest symbol of the divided city, the Brandenburg Gate.

Enthusiastic crowds had been flocking to the Brandenburg Gate from both West and East Berlin since the borders had been opened a few short hours earlier. The Gate stood in the middle of Berlin and straddled the main East-West thoroughfare, which had been cut off by the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961. Located in the Berlin Wall death strip and surrounded by no-man's-land, the Gate had for decades been out of reach of everyone but the East German border soldiers. Now, in the middle of the night between November 9 and 10, more and more people made their way from both west and east to the Brandenburg Gate. This was also the only location where the Berlin Wall had a broad, flat area on top so that people could actually stand on it. All other sections of the Wall featured a rounded top, which made it impossible to stand on and difficult even to grasp onto by hand, a construction design meant to hinder escape attempts. Buoyed by enthusiasm and in some cases by alcohol, people hoisted each other up to reach the top of the nearly twelve-foot Wall. The Wall at the Brandenburg Gate seemed to offer the perfect place for celebrating Berliners to gather, some of them hammering away at the Wall and removing small pieces.

Concerned by the damage to their well-constructed border and with the growing chaos surrounding the Gate, the East German authorities tried to gain control of the situation by directing the border soldiers to urge the revelers to get down and leave the area or, when that did not work, by forcing the revelers down by the use of water cannons. The officers and soldiers on duty there were faced with West Berliners trying to come over the Wall from the West into the East and by East Berliners entering the secure zone of the Brandenburg Gate from the East, walking en masse right past the armed guards, and using ladders or even climbing on top of the water cannons to get up onto the Wall to join the others. In response, the border troops based in Berlin were put on alert and all possible units were ordered to deploy to the Brandenburg Gate.⁴ Although Georg's guard regiment was not part of the border troops, it was based only a few blocks from the Gate and it would take some time for other backup forces to get through the chaos of the city, so he and his regiment were ordered to go to the Gate.

By 5 a.m., more than 600 border officers and soldiers, police, and other units had secured the area around the Brandenburg Gate between the Wall and the eastern security perimeter where Georg and his colleagues joined policemen in a human chain. The East German authorities ended the state of alert. Yet it was difficult to stop the people partying on top of the Wall. As soon as the border soldiers would coax them down, new people eager to celebrate would

⁴ Hans-Hermann Hertle, *Chronik des Mauerfalls: Die dramatischen Ereignisse um den 9. November 1989*, 11th expanded ed. (Berlin: Ch. Links, 2009), pp. 176–84.

arrive and climb up, especially once daylight broke on November 10.⁵ The state of alert was repeated on the night of November 10–11, and Georg remained on duty at the Gate for nearly forty-eight hours, alternating between standing at his post in the defense chain at the eastern perimeter of the Brandenburg Gate and resting in the truck.

On one of the occasions when the East German authorities had removed revelers from the area around the Gate and things were relatively quiet, Georg took the chance to do what so many others wanted to do: he walked through the Brandenburg Gate. Thinking, “I’ll probably never have this chance again,” Georg strode through one of the portals of the massive stone structure. He saw the external Berlin Wall ahead of him, lit up by security spotlights from the eastern side and television lights from the western side. Just the day before, he could have never imagined he would be there, and he had no idea what would happen next. He turned and walked back rather nervously to his position guarding the eastern side of the Gate.

Deployed there, as part of the human security chain, Georg and the others were fully visible to everyone. During the day, a constant stream of tourists on bus tours kept going by taking pictures of them, and people yelled at them day and night: “You Stasi pigs!” and “Open the Gate!” It was hard to stand there and take it all. Georg felt immensely grateful when a woman in the crowd yelled back, “Shut up! It could be my son standing there.” It was a much-needed psychological boost for the nineteen-year-old country boy suddenly thrust into the center of national and international politics: at least someone had empathy for his situation.

When crowds again massed at the Brandenburg Gate on the night of November 10–11, things were less peaceful than the night before. Some of the revelers threw Molotov cocktails over to the eastern side and threatened the border troops, who responded with strong bursts from their water cannons. The West Berlin police chief, Georg Schertz, feared that if someone was injured or perhaps even killed, the situation could really escalate. He proposed to the East German security forces that they direct border guards to stand on the Wall, thus preventing the masses of regular citizens from climbing up there. Schertz would then deploy police vans and a chain of policemen to guard the western side of the Wall, thereby protecting the East German border guards and the Wall. This was all in place by noon on November 11, with around 300 unarmed border soldiers standing on top of the Wall and the West Berlin police in front of them.⁶ The following night the West Berlin police and East German border guards worked together to create a new border crossing point, just south of the Brandenburg Gate at Potsdamer Platz, so as to relieve the pressure at the Gate.⁷

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 185–86, 216.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 250–55.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 259–61.

East Germany ended the state of alert of the military forces on November 11 and that night Georg's unit returned to its barracks. Georg breathed huge sighs of relief and wondered how things would develop. By the end of the following month, conscripts were given the option of carrying out the rest of their service period in the civilian sphere, but they had to find their own posting. Georg called a well-connected friend of his mother and begged her, "Get me out of here as soon as possible! Please do anything you can." In the meantime, he carried out his duty guarding military buildings in East Berlin. Less than three months later, his mother's friend came through with a suitable placement. He returned to his village about fifty miles from Berlin and worked at a kindergarten, changing diapers, mowing the lawn, pulling weeds, and feeling very grateful.

Two young East German musicians, Robert and Petra, experienced the fall of the Wall very differently than Georg did.⁸ On the evening of November 9, they were out having dinner with friends at the Gendarmenmarkt, just outside of the concert hall where Robert played in the orchestra of the East German opera house, the *Staatsoper*, and only a few blocks from the Brandenburg Gate. As the evening went on, they kept hearing more and more sirens and saw many people on the streets. They vaguely wondered what was going on, but they were tired after a long day and went home to sleep. Only when they woke up the next morning did they learn what they had missed the night before! They decided right away to visit West Berlin. In their early twenties and with Petra nearly nine months pregnant, they expected the Wall would close again soon and wanted to seize the chance while they could to visit the West. Even if only in utero, they wanted their child to experience West Berlin.

They followed the rules and headed to their local police station to request permission to visit West Berlin. As they approached the police station, however, they saw that the line of people waiting to do the same thing snaked around the entire city block. Someone on the street told them: "Just go to the border; I've heard they're letting people pass through." So they headed to Friedrichstrasse, the central train terminal for movement between East and West Berlin, complete with its own border facilities and guards. The train station was packed with people who had the same idea. Robert wondered whether Petra was up to dealing with it all. Yes, she assured Robert, she was.

In order to shield Petra and her large stomach, Robert enlisted others in the crowd at Friedrichstrasse to join him in forming a human cordon around Petra. They inched their way slowly through the masses in the station and after what seemed like hours they made it through the unusually lax border facilities at the station and onto the famous platform B, the place to board trains headed west. Robert and Petra moved with the crowd through the doors of the train for the final stage of their journey toward West Berlin's central Zoo Station. The

⁸ The names of Robert and Petra have been changed to protect their anonymity.

elevated S-Bahn train tracks crossed over the Berlin Wall, fully visible below, and through the Tiergarten forest; the train deposited the happy, astonished passengers in the heart of downtown West Berlin within a matter of minutes. Their first stop was a bank (with another long line of fellow citizens) so that each of them could claim their 100 deutsche marks “welcome money.” The next stop was a place to eat where Petra could also sit and restore her energy.

Robert and Petra wandered around West Berlin for hours, looking at the shops, the streets, the colorful neon lights, and the people, before deciding it was time to head home. The S-Bahn was so full with other East Germans arriving in West Berlin or trying to get back home that they had to walk back to the nearest border entry point to reenter East Berlin. It turned out to be a long walk that brought them to the Checkpoint Charlie crossing point, normally only for use by non-Germans and particularly by members of the Allied Powers in Berlin: the United States, United Kingdom, France, and the Soviet Union. Yet, as with so much else since the previous night, everything was different. Robert and Petra made their way, again with masses of other people, through the checkpoint and eventually back to their apartment in East Berlin.

The next day, Petra wrote a note to their as yet unborn child, describing their November 10 adventure in case it was never to be repeated. When their daughter, Laura, was born in early December, the note was put into her scrapbook on a page for “major milestones in my life” so far. Years later, when Laura was old enough to understand and in fact was studying in what had been West Berlin, Petra would take out the scrapbook and tell her about that day.

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On the night of November 9–10, the Wall was instantly transformed from a hated and feared edifice into a symbol of the triumph of freedom. The fall of the Wall became a touchstone of global memory. For many, it reflected our better selves; a world where people came together instead of being pulled apart, where freedom prevailed, where walls were brought down instead of built up. It gave people hope that other obstacles could come tumbling down as well.

In Germany itself, within months of the fall of the Wall, the East German communist regime collapsed, and Germany was united less than a year later on October 3, 1990. East Germany’s main backer, the Soviet Union, ceased to exist the following year, and the Cold War was over. Robert would now travel with the *Staatsoper* and orchestra all over the world. Laura would eventually spend a summer working as an intern in Australia. Georg would enroll at Berlin’s Humboldt University, taking classes in English just a block or two from where his guard barracks had been. He interrupted his studies to spend a year in London improving his English and working as an intern at a German bank. Georg returned to Humboldt to study history and English and went on to become a historian. Like Petra, Robert, and Laura, he has traveled far and wide since unification.

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, only its memory remains – and the pieces of it that people took or bought. Many people were so moved by the peaceful demise of the seemingly permanent Berlin Wall that they rushed to Berlin to see “history in the making.” The chance to break off a piece of the Wall and to take it home as “my own piece of history” was an added bonus. But what does it mean to “own” a piece of history – both in the sense of locating history in a specific material object, like the Wall, and in the sense of making the past your own, extrapolating its meanings for the present? These issues are at the center of this book.

Visitors from around the world come to Germany’s capital city to see the Berlin Wall. They search Berlin for pieces of the iconic Wall, surprised there is not more to see. When visitors find the few remaining pieces of the Wall, they touch them, turn toward their friends holding a camera or smartphone and smile for the picture, keeping their hand firmly on the Wall. Touching the Wall makes them feel that they too are somehow part of its history.⁹ They have the feeling – “I was there!” – albeit only after the Wall was removed as a deadly state border.

Many people who come to see and touch the Wall know little in detail about the history of the Wall. They just know that it is famous – or infamous. They often do not realize that the Berlin Wall was in fact not just one wall but an external and internal wall with a layer of obstacles in between, including armed guards with an order to shoot people trying to escape. This “death strip” was far more forbidding than a look at the few surviving remains of the Berlin Wall indicates. As Rainer Klemke, a long-time senior official of the Berlin Senate’s department of cultural affairs, puts it: “The Wall was like a living, dangerous polar bear, and only the fur is left.”¹⁰

For years after the fall of the Wall, visitors struggled to get a sense of how it felt when the city was divided by the Wall – and to do this at a place with original pieces of the Wall still standing. The desire to get rid of the Wall was stronger than the sense that some of it should be kept as a reminder. Even if Germans were reluctant to be reminded of the brutality of the Wall, an outsider might assume that united Germany would quickly establish the fall of the Wall as a central event to be remembered and celebrated, to be “owned.” As this work will demonstrate, however, it would take twenty years for German leaders and many others to embrace this part of their history and to remember the Berlin Wall in the public sphere. Along the way, there would be an intense battle over the relative weights of the Nazi and communist periods in German memory policy and over the right balance in commemoration between what some Germans call the “negative” and the “positive” moments in their twentieth-century history.

⁹ Polly Feversham and Leo Schmidt, *Die Berliner Mauer Heute/The Berlin Wall Today* (Berlin: Verlag Bauwesen, 1999), p. 128.

¹⁰ Rainer Klemke, “Between Disappearance and Remembrance: Remembering the Berlin Wall Today,” in Anna Kaminsky, ed., *Where in the World Is the Berlin Wall?* (Berlin: Berlin Story Verlag, 2014), p. 253.

Debates about whether and how to remember the Berlin Wall (its rise and fall and the twenty-eight years it stood in between) would become caught up in these broader battles and would exert significant influence on them.

This book traces and analyzes the multiple German approaches to the historical memory of the Berlin Wall since 1989. It focuses on official, public memory in public spaces seen and experienced by millions of people, although personal and private approaches to memory are included when they influence the public process. This work also examines connections between the German contest over the memory of the Berlin Wall and German identity in the twenty-first century.¹¹

Germany and the Berlin Wall

For twenty-eight years, Germans killed Germans for trying to escape over the Berlin Wall. This German structure became a worldwide symbol for repression, communism, and the Cold War itself. In 1952, Kremlin chief Joseph Stalin had closed East Germany's border with West Germany so as to stop East Germans from fleeing to West Germany. This left Berlin – more than 100 miles inside communist East Germany – as the only place in Germany with free movement between East and West. East German leader Walter Ulbricht desperately wanted to close this “loophole,” and for years he pressed for Soviet backing to do so. The attraction of West Berlin as an island of capitalism and democracy in the midst of the communist German Democratic Republic (GDR) was too great a threat to Ulbricht's hard-line regime. Berlin, however, was under Four Power control by the Soviets, Americans, British, and French, making any unilateral move there risky. Stalin had tried to cut off Western access to Berlin with the Berlin Blockade in 1948–49, but the West had responded with the airlift. Stalin's successor, Nikita Khrushchev, had tried to push the West out of West Berlin by demanding it be transformed into a demilitarized “free city” in the fall of 1958, but the West refused to withdraw.

Ulbricht grew increasingly frustrated with Khrushchev's temporizing in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The East German leader was concerned that refugees, especially those with higher levels of education and skills, continued to stream from East to West via West Berlin. Whole towns were bereft of doctors due to this brain drain, and factories had trouble meeting production targets with so many of their workers leaving. Ulbricht started to clamp down on movement between East and West Berlin, and the Soviets repeatedly reprimanded him for taking “unilateral actions on the borders of Berlin” without their knowledge or assent. Finally, in July 1961, in the wake of a failed summit meeting between

¹¹ Earlier versions of some of the concepts developed in this book can be found in Hope M. Harrison, “The Berlin Wall and its Resurrection as a Site of Memory,” *German Politics and Society* 29, no. 2 (Summer 2011), pp. 78–106; and Harrison, “From Shame to Pride: The Fall of the Berlin Wall through German Eyes,” *The Wilson Quarterly*, November 4, 2014.

Khrushchev and President John F. Kennedy, with more than 1,000 East Germans fleeing every day, and Ulbricht warning of the impending collapse of his state, Khrushchev gave in to Ulbricht's calls to close the border in Berlin.¹²

At midnight on the night of August 12–13, East German police and construction troops suddenly began sealing off the nearly 100-mile border around West Berlin so that East Germans could not access the city from East Berlin or from the surrounding East German countryside. Streets, subway stations, waterways, and families were cut in two. In the following days, particularly dramatic scenes took place at Bernauer Strasse where people jumped out of their windows (sometimes with East German soldiers trying to stop them) on the East Berlin side of the street toward the sidewalk below, which was in West Berlin. If they were lucky, they landed in the huge nets held by West Berlin firemen.

To close the border, East German troops used barbed wire at first and within days began to replace it with cement bricks. Then they topped this with broken pieces of glass or barbed wire to make it difficult to climb over. They created a whole border strip, which would become known in the West as the death strip (Figure 2), with external and internal walls, guard towers, guard dogs, signal fences, anti-vehicle obstacles, bright lights, and armed guards who were ordered to shoot at would-be escapees.¹³ People were forced to move out of houses in the death strip, for example on the eastern side of Bernauer Strasse, and the houses were boarded up and eventually destroyed. The East German leaders wanted the border guards to have full visibility in the Berlin Wall border zone, with a clear line of sight of potential moving targets running toward West Berlin.

Trying to cross the border without permission (“flight from the Republic” or *Republikflucht*) was labelled a crime. Those who were caught doing so were, in the best case, imprisoned or, in the worst case, killed. Many people constructed tunnels under the Wall, such as at Bernauer Strasse.¹⁴ Some made it out; others were captured. Tens of thousands of East Germans would be imprisoned for attempting or being suspected of planning *Republikflucht* in Berlin or elsewhere along the borders. Nearly 140 people would be killed at the Berlin Wall and hundreds more would be killed for attempting to leave the GDR at other points along the border.¹⁵ Sometimes people who escaped to the West were captured by

¹² Hope M. Harrison, *Driving the Soviets up the Wall: Soviet-East German Relations, 1953–1961* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

¹³ Patrick Major, *Behind the Berlin Wall: East Germany and the Frontiers of Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); and Hans-Hermann Hertle, *The Berlin Wall – Monument of the Cold War* (Berlin: Ch. Links, 2007).

¹⁴ Maria Nooke, ed., *Mauergeschichten von Flucht und Fluchthilfe. Begegnung mit Zeitzeugen* (Berlin: Ch. Links, 2017); Klaus-M. von Keussler and Peter Schulenburg, *Fluchthelfer: Die Gruppe um Wolfgang Fuchs* (Berlin: Berlin Story Verlag, 2015); and Greg Mitchell, *The Tunnels: Escapes Under the Berlin Wall and the Historic Films the JFK White House Tried to Kill* (New York: Crown, 2016).

¹⁵ Hans-Hermann Hertle and Maria Nooke, eds., *The Victims at the Berlin Wall, 1961–1989: A Biographical Handbook* (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 2011); and Pertti Aho, *Death at the*