

Introduction

“From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the continent. Behind that line lie all the capitals of the ancient states of central and eastern Europe. Warsaw, Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade, Bucharest, and Sofia, . . . ,” declared former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill in Fulton, Missouri, on March 5, 1946. Five days later, the *New York Times* explained what Churchill had meant, providing a map of Europe that exhibited a wall running down from the Baltic coast west of Szczecin/Stettin, along the Oder-Neisse-river system, the western borders of Czechoslovakia and Hungary, and then the northwestern border of Yugoslavia to the Adriatic coast just east of Trieste (Map 1).¹ But both Churchill and the *New York Times* had overstated the case. Neither did an Iron Curtain that hermetically sealed Eastern from Western Europe exist in the spring of 1946, nor was Berlin behind it. Millions of ethnic Germans, East European Jews, and displaced persons of many nationalities moved across this line in either direction for years after World War II. And no *wall* ever graced that particular line, although concrete walls divided Germany and enclosed West Berlin after 1961.

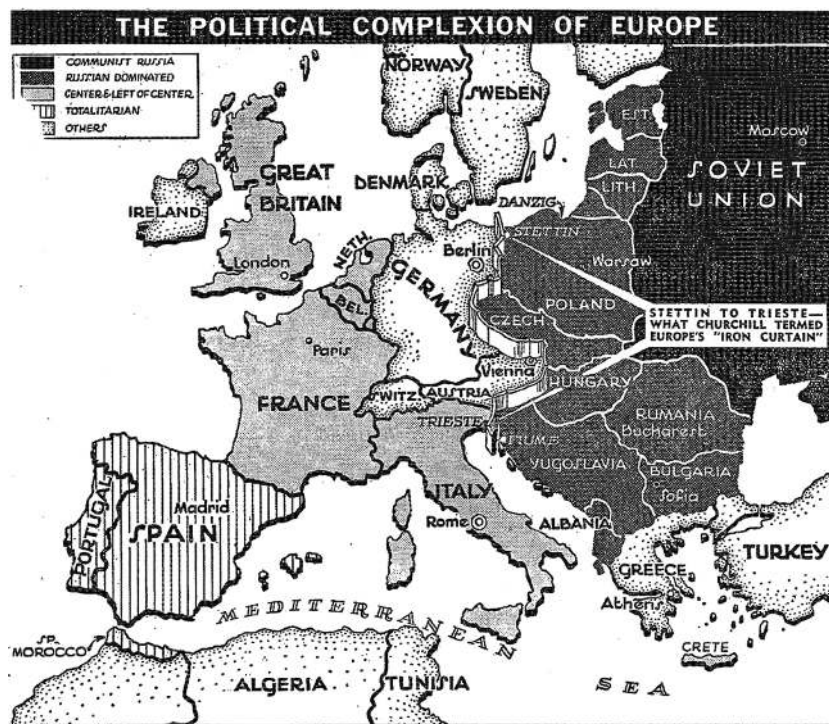
Within ten days, Joseph Stalin claimed that Churchill had borrowed the term Iron Curtain from “Hitler and his friends.”² He, too, overstated his case. The term originated in the late eighteenth century and denoted a theater’s metal fire curtain that could be lowered to separate the stage hermetically from the audience in the fire-prone theaters of the time. In World War I, it also assumed the political meaning of hermetically sealing borders between two states. Almost a decade after the war, a German politician bemoaned the “iron curtain” that had separated France and Germany politically and economically since World War I.³ Moreover, since the October Revolution in 1917, Western politicians and journalists had used the metaphor to describe the increasing self-isolation of Soviet Russia (since 1922, the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics/ USSR). The term reappeared after World War II in descriptions of Soviet foreign policy in Europe. Churchill himself used the term in June of 1945 in a telegram to US President Harry S. Truman, and again in August at the opening of the new House of Commons.⁴ In short, in March 1946, he merely turned a widely used trope into an iconic Cold War metaphor.

¹ *NYT*, 3/6/1946:4 (quote); *NYT*, 3/10/1946:E5.

² “Interview of Comrade I.V. Stalin with a ‘Pravda’ correspondent on Churchill’s Speech,” *Pravda*, 3/14/1946, p. 1.

³ Christian Koller, “Der Eiserne Vorhang,” *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, 54/4 (2006), pp. 372–73; *NZZ-n*, 9/30/1919:1; *NZZ-e*, 2/6/1928:1 (quote).

⁴ Koller, “Der Eiserne Vorhang,” p. 375; “The British Prime Minister (Churchill) to President Truman,” 6/4/1945, United States, Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, vol. III (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1968), p. 326; *Newsweek*, 8/27/1945:44.



Map 1 Five days after Churchill's famous speech, the *New York Times* published this map, showing a wall where none ever existed.

Source: *NYT*, March 10, 1946, p. E5.

But how did the Iron Curtain look like on the ground during the Cold War? The various forms of Iron Curtains call for a historical analysis that decenters the Cold War by focusing on national borders of the Socialist Camp instead of concentrating exclusively on Soviet border policies and fortifications. In any case, the term “Iron Curtain” usually brings to our mind pictures of the so-called Berlin Wall between 1961 and 1989. Historically, the Iron Curtain around West Berlin and its concurrent counterpart along the German–German border were just the most extreme examples of external borders of the Socialist Camp. Both initially consisted of barbed wire and brick stone barriers. Only with time, they became concrete walls – flanked by a death strip with mines, ditches, barbed wires, electrified fences, and fast-shooting guards – that ripped apart the German capital and even German villages from 1961 to 1989. The *primary* purpose of the German Iron Curtain was to prevent East German citizens from leaving because the communist regime needed their labor to build up a socialist state. Unsurprisingly, the Berlin and German walls became places of spectacular

escapes. Trains and armored cars broke through, small airplanes and balloons crossed above, tunnels traversed underground, and people managed to pass across. But refugees were also stopped, arrested, and killed.⁵ Between October 1949 and November 1989, at least 159 refugees were killed at the borders around West Berlin and at least 327 at the German–German border.⁶

Yet, the walls dividing Berlin and Germany were not only *extreme* cases, but also *late* developments at the Iron Curtain between the Baltic and the Adriatic Sea. The western borders of Hungary and Czechoslovakia had been fortified with barbed wire, minefields, and shooting border guards – but not walls – as early as the end of the 1940s to prevent people from leaving. Interestingly, Hungary started to reduce its border regime in the second half of the 1960s, when East Germany was building walls around West Berlin and through Germany. East Germany and Czechoslovakia recurrently shot and killed fleeing citizens until 1989, while Hungary’s western border became remarkably, but not completely, non-lethal for the last two decades of the Cold War. Nevertheless, the very last illegal border crosser of the Central European Iron Curtain – a citizen of the GDR – was shot dead at the Hungarian–Austrian border on August 21, 1989. But since 1979, Hungarian citizens could visit Austria without visas, while East Germans suffered extralegal persecution just for filing a formal request to travel or even emigrate to the non-socialist world.⁷ At other stretches of the external borders of the Socialist Camp, however, the Iron Curtain was not even fortified, with people and animals crossing back and forth.

Traditionally, borders have served multiple purposes. Delineated border lines mark where one state ends and another one begins. Fortifications primarily functioned as a military deterrence between hostile neighbors. Secured borders and designated entry/exit points operated to control people from crossing in either direction. Customarily, modern states were interested in controlling who was entering, that is, in filtering desirable from undesirable visitors. Yet, the

⁵ *WP*, 12/6/1961:A1; *CDT*, 11/15/1961:5; *Sun*, 4/10/1978:A2; *Newsday*, 9/17/1979:1Q; Dietmar Arnold, and Sven Felix Kellerhoff, *Unterirdisch in die Freiheit* (Ch. Links, 2015); *HC*, 3/7/1967:1a; Sven Felix Kellerhoff, Lars-Broder Keil, and Thomas Schmid, *Mord an der Mauer* (Quadriga, 2012).

⁶ Gerhard Sälter, Johanna Dietrich, and Fabian Kuhn, *Die vergessenen Toten* (Ch. Links, 2016), pp. 97–238; Hans-Hermann Hertle, *Die Todesopfer an der Berliner Mauer 1961–1989* (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2020), p. 22; Klaus Schroeder and Jochen Staadt, *Die Todesopfer des DDR-Grenzregimes an der innerdeutschen Grenze 1949–1989* (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2007). The statistics do not include death by drowning in the Baltic Sea or the killing of GDR citizens trying to cross other borders.

⁷ Dieter Szorger and Pia Bayer, *Das Burgenland und der Fall des Eisernen Vorhangs* (Amt der Burgenländischen Landesregierung, 2009), pp. 13–16; Hans-Hermann Lochen, “Die geheimgehaltenen Bestimmungen über das Ausreiseverfahren als Ausdruck staatlicher Willkür,”; Bernd Eisenfeld, Hans H. Lochen, Irena Kukutz, Werner Hilse, and Joachim Gauck, *Ausreisen oder dableiben?* 2nd ed (BStU, 1998), pp. 20–29.

external borders of the former socialist states, particularly their borders to non-socialist states, were almost *unique* in recent history, as we will see in the following nine sections. Their fortifications were *primarily* designed to keep people from leaving in the first place. In many respects, these barriers were the last of a series of obstacles – legal and physical – for anybody attempting to depart. Citizens who tried to exit legally needed to get a passport and an exit visa (i.e., the permission to leave legally), both of which often were nearly impossible to obtain. The fortification of borders and the danger of being killed by trying to cross them illegally served for many as a deterrent not to try at all. A nonagenarian family friend, who had lived her whole life in East Berlin, once told this author that she would not have gone even near the East German borders, because everybody knew that “they” – the border guards – would shoot to kill. In the Soviet Union of the 1930s, the existence of both fortified borders and the repressive state equally served as psychological deterrence not to request a passport or an exit visa.⁸

Hence, leaving illegally often was the only path for the courageous few, but it required planning, preparations, and subterfuge. This included scouting out suitable border areas, surreptitiously hand-copying border area maps in public libraries, as well as preparing food, clothes, vehicles, and other necessary items. However, escapes often did not go beyond the planning stage since security services were vigilant. Between 1961 and 1989, around 75,000 GDR citizens were arrested while preparing to escape or during the attempt itself, according to the best estimates. If not discovered early on, illegal border crossers still had to surmount a set of obstacles, including restricted border areas several kilometers wide, minefields, barbed wires, electrical fences, trip wires that released signal flares and alarmed fast-shooting border guards, and, in the case of East Germany, automatic self-shooting mechanisms and the actual wall.⁹

Given the prominence of the term *Iron Curtain* in Western rhetoric during the Cold War and in the later historiography, the actual borders of the Socialist Camp have attracted surprisingly little scholarly attention, except for the massive number of specialized publications on the borders dividing Berlin and Germany. Cold War historians have used the Iron Curtain mainly as a metaphor for the East–West division, as a synonym for the Soviet oppression of East European peoples after 1945, or as a marker of the start of the global

⁸ Andrea Chandler, *Institutions of Isolation* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1998), pp. 18–23, 74–77.

⁹ LAT, 12/26/1980:C7; WP, 11/15/1961:A1; Gerhard Säler, *Das Grenzregime im Zentrum Berlins* (Ch. Links, 2018), p. 43; Gordon L. Rottman and Chris Taylor, *The Berlin Wall and the Inner-German Border 1961–89* (Osprey, 2008).

conflict.¹⁰ Authors interested in the actual border lines and areas have mainly focused on its ecological meaning for declining plant and animal species during the Cold War, or on how it has come to look afterwards.¹¹

The external borders of the Socialist Camp consisted of several sectors, interrupted by large bodies of water like the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea, the Caspian Sea, the South China Sea, the Yellow Sea, the Sea of Japan, the North Pacific Ocean, and the Bering Sea. The principal stretch on land was the Central European sector that divided the continent along the western borders of East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Yugoslavia. After the 1950s, though, Cold War observers no longer considered Yugoslavia to belong to the Socialist Camp and hence inside the Iron Curtain.¹² Unlike the other external borders of the Socialist Camp, the Central European sector of the Iron Curtain cut through densely populated territories that had long historical, economic, political, and personal connections with each other – most importantly in the form of pre-1945 Germany, the pre-1918 Austro-Hungarian Empire, and historically mixed ethnic settlement patterns. Millions of people still passed across the Central European sector in the immediate post-World War II period. Only by the late 1940s did the emerging communist regimes in Yugoslavia, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia – but not East Germany – begin to fortify their borders for a variety of reasons: to prevent political dissidents from leaving in order to organize political activities abroad, to arrest them for punishment, or to retain their own people for mainly economic reasons. It was this particular sector that Churchill had in mind when he gave his Iron Curtain speech in March of 1946.

Yet, Western Cold War rhetoric soon applied the term Iron Curtain to all sectors of the external borders of the Socialist Camp. The Nordic sector, running through forests and waterways, separated the USSR from Finland and Norway. The Balkan sector split Albania, Yugoslavia, and Bulgaria from Greece and Turkey. The mountainous Caucasian sector separated the Soviet Union from Turkey and Iran. The Iron Curtain then followed through deserts, in the fairways of rivers, and along the Himalayas to Southeast Asia. Finally, its East Asian

¹⁰ Patrick Wright, *Iron Curtain* (Oxford University Press, 2007); Anne Applebaum, *Iron Curtain* (Anchor Books, 2013); Mark Kramer and Vit Smetana, eds., *Imposing, Maintaining, and Tearing Open the Iron Curtain* (Lexington Books, 2014); Vernon Bartlett, *East of the Iron Curtain* (Latimer House, 1949); John Gunther, *Behind the Curtain* (Harper, 1949); Poul Villume and O. Arne Westad, eds., *Perforating the Iron Curtain* (Museum Tusculanum Press, 2010); Fraser J. Harbutt, *The Iron Curtain* (Oxford University Press, 1986); Pierre de Senarclens, *From Yalta to the Iron Curtain* (Berg, 1995).

¹¹ Astrid M. Eckert, *West Germany and the Iron Curtain* (Oxford University Press, 2019); Timothy Phillips, *Retracing the Iron Curtain* (The Experiment, 2022); Peter Laufer, *Iron Curtain Rising* (Mercury House, 1991); Sonja K. Pieck, *Mnemonic Ecologies* (MIT Press, 2023).

¹² *JP*, 7/15/1953:4.

variation detached Hong Kong and Macao from communist mainland China after 1949 and has partitioned Korea since 1953.

Moreover, Western rhetoric did not always match the reality and location of the fortified and closed socialist borders that emerged in the Cold War. The external borders of the Socialist Camp ranged widely from hardly demarcated boundary lines to border strips sporting walls. Yet almost the same kind of borders *also* appeared at some of the boundaries *between socialist states* in East Europe, revealing ethnic and political fault lines similar to those between the Cold War blocs. In the early 1950s, for example, Romania's border to Hungary looked remarkably similar to Hungary's border to Austria. But these kinds of fortified boundaries, including depopulated border zones, appeared almost *exclusively* at the borders of socialist states – and virtually nowhere else – during the Cold War.

On the whole, the post–World War II Iron Curtain emerged in the historical context of international, Imperial Russian, and Soviet interwar border controls. Before World War I, the movement of people within Europe, the Northern Atlantic world, and the Americas had been surprisingly unconstrained, although numerous restrictions applied to the rest of the world and particularly to colonial subjects. Both global wars witnessed the introduction of entry visas for non-citizens and exit visas for both citizens and non-citizens. Only few states – among them the United States, the United Kingdom, and France – completely lifted these rigid wartime restrictions after the end of either hostility.¹³ Yet, in the context of the evolving Cold War, the US Department of State denied passports to individual American citizens who were suspected of pro-Soviet sympathies, although the Supreme Court eventually terminated this practice in 1958. Still, in 1921 and 1926, the League of Nations hosted two conferences to reestablish visa-free travel at a global level, but with little success. Similarly, the United Nations discussed the problem in 1947, largely under pressure from American tourist organizations and Western chambers of commerce concerned about the continued negative impact of closed borders to the free movement of people and goods.¹⁴

1 Soviet Interwar Borders

A relatively small, but excellent, body of historiography helps us to outline the development of Soviet citizenship laws, passport regulations, exit visa practices, and border controls during the interwar period. These two decades

¹³ John Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 93–116; *NYTribune*, 7/26/1919:3; *Sun*, 8/30/1945:12; *Tat*, 9/26/1945:7; *Bund-m*, 3/7/1946:2.

¹⁴ *CDT*, 4/3/1948:A4; *NYT*, 8/24/1948:10; *GM*, 8/4/1950:2; *NYT*, 6/17/1958:1; *Observer*, 4/24/1921:7; *NYT*, 1/22/1946:4; *NYT*, 1/8/1947:4; *NYT*, 3/15/1947:3; *CSM*, 4/14/1947:7.

witnessed a change from relative openness in the 1920s to almost complete and fortified self-isolation in the 1930s. After the October Revolution in late 1917, a significant number of mostly urbanites and then White Russians fled the country out of fear of persecution. The new government lacked the means to stop this exodus, despite the introduction of passport and exit/entry rules in late 1917. By mid-1921, Soviet authorities decided to denaturalize 1.5 million Russian refugees that refused to apply for a Soviet passport from abroad. The relatively few returnees that had accepted Soviet citizenship underwent mandatory police registration on arrival and then were prohibited from leaving Soviet Russia/the USSR ever again.¹⁵

Nevertheless, legal exit remained possible until the late 1920s. The vast majority of the more than 600,000 people leaving legally in that decade were prisoners of war and individuals who opted for non-Soviet citizenship. From the establishment of the USSR in 1922 to approximately 1928 most Soviet citizens were still allowed to travel abroad with a valid passport and an exit visa, provided they had entry visas to other countries. However, by 1926, the passport fees had become prohibitive – 200 rubles (amounting to circa three monthly wages; equaling 100 US\$) for workers, and 300 (150 US\$) for all others. During the 1921–26 period, for which data is available, almost 200,000 Soviet citizens lawfully exited on external travel. Starting in 1924, Soviet citizens who had left legally but refused to return also were deprived of their citizenship. Authorities increasingly worried about the continued exit of limited hard currency available, which led to a further restriction of access to valuta and hence the opportunity to travel abroad.¹⁶

At the end of the Civil War in 1922, illegal border crossings in either direction formally became criminal offenses, while stricter border controls were introduced. The Criminal Code of 1922/24 punished offenders with “compulsory labour or imprisonment for a period of up to six months, or with a fine up to 500 roubles.” In 1934, exiting the Soviet Union without permission even could lead to charges of treason. Two years later, the fine was dropped but the penalty increased to “confinement in a [corrective labor] camp for a period of from one to 3 years.” Both the application of these rules and the progressively well-guarded Soviet borders to the Baltic states, Poland, and Romania had a negative

¹⁵ Eric Lohr, *Soviet Citizenship* (Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 145; Chandler, *Institutions of Isolation*, pp. 34, 147–48; Yuri Felshtinsky, “The Legal Foundations of the Immigration and Emigration Policy of the USSR,” *Soviet Studies*, 34/3 (1982), p. 328.

¹⁶ Valerian V. Obolensky-Ossinsky, “Emigration from and Immigration into Russia,” Walter F. Willcox, ed., *International Migrations*, vol. II (National Bureau of Economic Research, 1931), pp. 571–72; Albert Baiburin, *The Soviet Passport* (Polity, 2021), pp. 23, 54–55; Felshtinsky, “The Legal Foundations,” pp. 340–42; Chandler, *Institutions of Isolation*, pp. 52, 71, 74; CSM, 8/10/1922:11; NYT, 4/8/1926:27.

impact on historical cross-border relations. Given the hostile relations to its Central European neighbors and the operations of anti-Bolshevik organizations, the USSR refused to enter into agreements allowing cross-border contacts between local populations there, in contrast to its practice at its Caucasian border with Turkey and Persia/Iran.¹⁷

As early as May 1918, the Bolshevik regime decreed the creation of designated border zones where buildings and agricultural cultivation were slated for removal. In 1922, Soviet authorities reestablished a border guard corps similar to the Tsarist predecessor after the boundaries of the first communist state with neighboring European states had been stabilized following years of military conflict. The recreated border guard corps was put under the supervision of the secret police – the Cheka and later the GPU (State Political Directorate, renamed in 1923 to OGPU/Joint State Political Directorate). In 1923, Soviet authorities also created a layered border regime of a 4-meter-wide border strip, a 500-meter-wide border zone, a 7.5-kilometer-wide border area, and a 22-kilometer-wide border region.¹⁸

The subsequent development of the Soviet border guard corps occurred in unison with similar developments in the Baltic states, Poland, and Romania. Its task was both defensive in terms of border protection against neighboring states and émigré agitation and offensive in terms of disinformation warfare and political infiltration. In January 1925, the Politburo of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) set the number of border guards at 31,500 men, of whom 30 percent served at the Central European border sector.¹⁹

In the early 1920s, Soviet authorities formally reintroduced Tsarist regulations on the use of physical force at its borders. In February 1921, the regulations of 1912 authorizing the use of weapons to stop anybody escaping pursuit, regardless of direction, were reinstated. They primarily focused on suppressing smuggling into and out of Soviet Russia/USSR. In 1923, the Imperial Russian prohibition to shoot across the border into the neighboring country was formally reintroduced and kept in place until 1960, although it was not always observed, as we will see later. In March that year, Soviet authorities also defined for the

¹⁷ Russia [R.S.F.S.R.], *The Criminal Code of the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic [1922–24]* (His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1925), p. 25 (first quote); Sabine Dullin, *La frontière épaisse* (EHES, 2014), pp. 242–44; second quote in: United States, Central Intelligence Agency, Foreign Documents Division, *RSFSR Criminal Code, 1956 edition* (CIA, 1958), p. 43 (brackets in original); Dullin, *La frontière épaisse*, pp. 116–118, 150–51; Chandler, *Institutions of Isolation*, p. 32.

¹⁸ Chandler, *Institutions of Isolation*, p. 38; Dullin, *La frontière épaisse*, pp. 42–43, 83, 103–7; Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action State* (Cornell University Press, 2001), p. 314.

¹⁹ Dullin, *La frontière épaisse*, pp. 46–56, 154–55, 162–68.