

Reading Program Benchmark Quote Analysis #1

Topic: The Berlin Wall

Book: The Collapse: The Accidental Opening of the Berlin Wall

Author: Mary Elise Sarotte

Guided Questions:

1. How and why was the Berlin Wall built? What did the GDR/USSR gain from constructing the Berlin Wall?
2. How did the Berlin Wall's/strong border policies' presence impact relations between the GDR/USSR and other European countries?
3. Was there resistance to the Wall/strong border policies? Did resistance influence the collapse of the Wall?

First Question: *How and why was the Berlin Wall built? What did the GDR/USSR gain from constructing the Berlin Wall?*

Quote that addresses this question:

1. **“On August 13 of that year, however, the SED, under the leadership of Walter Ulbricht, halted such movement by starting construction of the Wall, thereby sealing off the western sectors of the city from both East Berlin and the rest of the GDR. East Germany had simply been losing too many people to the West, especially those of working age” (Sarotte 8).**

This quote shows that the main motivation for the construction of the Berlin Wall was to control population movement. Post World War II Germany was divided into four sectors among Britain, France, the United States, and the Soviet Union. Berlin was also split into the East and West, with the Soviets controlling the east and the United States, France, and Britain controlling the West. In 1949, the Soviet Union oversaw the construction of a new state, the German Democratic Republic (GDR). This new state took control of the eastern area of former Germany, so it entirely surrounded West Berlin. The GDR was ruled by the Socialist Unity Party (SED). The SED made all important decisions with guidance and approval from Soviet leaders in Moscow. Since the SED was essentially a puppet government of the Soviets, their decisions were heavily influenced by Soviet ideology. This explains the extreme amount of control citizens living under the GDR experienced. SED officials allowed surveillance and interrogation of politically suspect people by means of agencies like the State Security Service, or Stasi. The Stasi routinely abducted people, censored media, and controlled every aspect of citizens' lives. Such influence extended to the idea of using the Wall as a physical means of preventing people from escaping their tyrannical regime. West Berlin and the countries surrounding the GDR were the escapes for people seeking a better life, so in the early days of the regime, East Germans escaped by sneaking over the borders. Many of these people were employed in useful jobs, and the loss of too many of them would devastate the GDR. It was imperative that the SED stopped the mass migration to the West. To combat the massive amount of people leaving the GDR, in

1961, the SED leader Walter Ulbricht had the preliminary stages of the wall built overnight. Barbed wire was laid out, guards patrolled the border, and checkpoints were put in place. As time went on, the Wall would be actually built and more fortifications, guards, and checkpoints would be established. This would drastically reduce the number of people leaving the GDR, and keep it in a stable position. The main goal of the Wall was accomplished, and it would maintain successful in preserving its mission for decades to come.

Second Question: *How did the Berlin Wall's/strong border policies' presence impact relations between the GDR and other European countries?*

Quote that addresses this question:

1. **“From their partners in Hungary, Stasi officials urgently sought clarification of what Budapest’s new interest in UN commitments meant for the citizens of the GDR. They soon got their answer. By July, Budapest began diverging more and more from his long-standing practice. Hungarian border officials were still hindering escape attempts by East Germans—including with firearms, as what happened in August 1989—but, as the Stasi noted, the number of such people return to Eastern security forces, or even simply identified by name to East Berlin as having made an escape attempt, was dwindling. The decreasing cooperation between that Stasi and the Hungarian security forces paralleled a decrease in cooperation between the Stasi and its Polish equivalent” (Sarotte 24).**

This quote refers to Hungary’s evolving relationship with the GDR, and how the GDR’s strong border policies made interactions strained. Hungary had been in a treaty with the GDR, vowing to stop all East Germans crossing the GDR-Hungary border without permission. They would send those who they caught back to the Stasi. In 1989, a Polish Solidarity movement succeeded, and democratization would take place in Poland. This inspired Hungary to follow suit. With the ideals of freedom and democracy in the mind of Hungarian Prime Minister Miklós Németh, he decided to remove all fortifications along Hungary’s western and southern border in summer 1989. This would upset the SED, as now citizens would have an easier time escaping the country, but Hungary promised to increase border patrols in the area to compensate for the loss of fortifications. Soon after, Hungary took part in the UN Convention on Refugees, and this would prevent Hungarian patrols from sending East Germans back to the GDR if Hungary classified East Germans as refugees. Hungary was convinced by West Germany to do so. The quote refers to how even though Hungary still did sometimes catch East German refugees fleeing, it became increasingly rare, because Hungarian border patrols were seemingly no longer participating in catching them. This is a result of West Germany’s negotiations with Hungary. Eventually, Hungary would fully open its borders, to the SED’s dismay, and an exodus of East Germans would ensue. This action infuriated the SED, who was trying to keep a tight grip of control on its citizens’ movements. Hungary was breaking its treaty with the GDR, and cooperation between the Stasi and Hungarian security forces was at an all-time low. Ultimately,

the strong border policies the SED put in place created a sympathetic attitude in Hungary, and as a result, led to the strained relationships between the two countries at the time.

Third Question: *Was there resistance to the Wall/strong border policies? Did resistance influence the collapse of the Wall?*

Quotes that address this question:

1. **“Wonneberger, together with a fellow minister, Michael Turek, decided to help this small circle of activists by all means, whether by letting them use the Nikolai peace prayers to plan protests or by providing space and supplies for underground publications. Hattenhauer, Schwabe, and their friends began to organize events such as the illicit street music festival, even though Stasi agents kept close tabs on them and regularly detained and interrogated them” (Sarotte 36).**

This quote shows the beginnings of a massive movement that was extremely influential in the collapse of the Wall. As a result of Hungary’s open borders policy, the GDR imposed even harsher border restrictions than beforehand on October 3, 1989, essentially sealing off the border. This infuriated East Germans, many of whom had holiday travel plans. Would be travelers to Czechoslovakia were stuck at the East German-Czech border in an area known as Saxony. They started to protest and riot. They stormed a train station where sealed trains with East Germans who sought refuge in the Prague embassy were going to come through, and blocked the train’s movement until police had to violently break up the protest. Violence in Saxony continued for days afterward. But, in the Nikolai Church in neighboring Leipzig, there were a few dissidents of the regime calling for peace, and sending a political message. Since 1982, every Monday ministers at the church would hold so-called “peace prayers.” Not only was it was a time for people to get together and hope for a better future, but the services were also politicized in a dissident manner. The church also served an important role as a meeting place for planning protests and other dissident actions. The Nikolai Church would be the breeding ground that would inspire many people to question the SED’s policies and give citizens a voice in a censored environment. It came under the heavy scrutiny of the Stasi, and multiple attempts to shut it down took place. After the violence in Saxony, thousands of people were motivated to become politically engaged and start attending the “peace prayers.” Every Monday, demonstrations would happen outside the Nikolai Church. Eventually, these small events would transform into the massive marches in Leipzig that would cause the SED to loosen its grip on the borders and would cause the downfall of the Berlin Wall. Clearly, there was plenty of resistance to the SED’s harsh border policies, and the resistance did help in tearing down the Berlin Wall.

2. **“This video, along with some other clips that would trickle out of Leipzig later, had a dramatic and motivating an effect on the peaceful revolution throughout the GDR. It also served to undermine the ruling regime. While the SED’s violence was self-defeating, became self-defeating more quickly because of the bright light that**

Western broadcasters could shine on it, thanks to Jahn's smuggling network. In other words, the efforts of activist such as Hattenhauer, Schwab, Wonneberger, and their colleagues were sped along by the efforts of their chroniclers and witnesses, including Cooper, Jahn, Radomski, Shefke, and Schwarz. This symbiosis between protesters and their publicizers was truly dangerous to the dictatorial regime” (Sarotte 80).

This quote refers to a video that two activists had filmed showing the massive Leipzig Ring Road March, and how effective it was in helping the resistance movement. Aram Radomski and Siegbert Schefke were a pair of dissidents involved in smuggling information out of the GDR to Western media outlets, in an effort bring attention to the conditions that people living under the regime suffered. Both were motivated by past injustices brought upon them by the SED and the Stasi. In the weeks before they shot the video of the march on October 9th, 1989, they came under surveillance of the Stasi and took significant risks by even owning cameras. The duo persevered, intent on filming the coming demonstration, in spite of the Stasi surveillance. What also occurred in the previous weeks was the massive build-up of protesters in Leipzig every Monday. Both knew that the October 9th demonstration would be the largest and most significant, and wanted to capture footage of it and smuggle it out of the country to bring attention to just how large the resistance movement was. They were also motivated by the fact that an event similar to the Tiananmen Square Massacre might occur, given the regime’s endorsement of the massacre and its previous uses of militaristic tactics to break up unapproved demonstrations. If there was any bloodshed that night, Radomski and Schefke wanted to be the ones filming it. On October 9th, after having evaded the Stasi for an entire day, they made their way up a church steeple that would overlook the march’s path, and set up their cameras. That night they captured on film 70,000 to 100,000 marchers walk past the church in a peaceful manner, protesting for more freedom, including travel freedom, the cause which had driven these Monday marches to get extremely popular. They then smuggled this footage out of Leipzig and brought the demonstration international attention. Both hoped what they did was helping bring down the SED and maybe even the Berlin Wall. The quote refers to how successful the footage was at motivating people to protest more and make their voices heard, and how it actually helped in threatening the regime’s power. The photographers and their smuggling network proved that the resistance movement had become massive. Both the photographers and the thousands of people that marched on October 9th unknowingly had a large impact on the collapse of the Berlin Wall, as after seeing the public’s and the world’s discontent with their policies, the SED loosened border restrictions, and as a result, the Berlin Wall collapsed.

- 3. “Politburo members decided in late October to investigate ways to loosen travel restrictions slightly as a concession to popular pressure. They aimed to produce an allegedly new travel law, but that law’s bureaucratic fine print would still allow the**

party, through the state apparatus, to control the movement of its people” (Sarotte 90).

This quote demonstrates how effective the protests were at influencing the SED's policies and shows the beginnings of the downfall of the Berlin Wall. Due to the continual protests throughout East Germany that were mostly caused by the travel ban, the Politburo, the highest decision making body in the SED, started to brainstorm how to loosen travel restrictions without giving away too much control. This was a step in the right direction for the resistance movement and shows just how effective the protests were. The protests had successfully started to scare communist leaders into submission, who usually ruled with an iron fist. Remarkably, this action of drafting new, looser travel restrictions actually brought down the Berlin Wall. In early November 1989, the SED allowed people in Czechoslovakia to move to the West without coming back to the GDR, which created a mass exodus to Czechoslovakia. This was not as the SED intended, so the SED kept revising a draft of the so-called “hole variant.” They assured leaders in Moscow that the border to West Germany would not just be opened and there would be one distinct point in which people could flow through. The people going through that checkpoint would also be highly regulated. Looking over the draft, Moscow approved of it, and SED members were tasked with making it into a final draft, where only those who wanted to emigrate permanently could go. This would hopefully reduce the number of people immigrating to the West would be reduced, while making it seem like there were looser border laws. Somehow, the SED members who were charged with the task, in their final draft, allowed emigration on both a temporary and permanent basis, from all parts of the GDR, including Berlin. This version was never approved by authorities in Moscow. They handed over the document to a spokesman who had not read the document before, and during a press conference with Western media, he further convoluted the actual meaning of the document, stating the new laws would be in effect “right away.” Almost immediately, Western media was reporting on it, and East Germans were swarming at the Berlin Wall. The guards at the Berlin Wall had no idea what was happening, but let the people through anyway. In the next few days, the regime's power would crumble, and so would the Berlin Wall - literally. People on both sides of the border brought tools to destroy it. So, because of the protests, new border laws were made and misinterpreted multiple times, and the Berlin Wall collapsed. The people protesting were the root cause of the Berlin Wall falling, and had the most massive impact on the collapse of the GDR and the reunification of Germany.