From August 13 1961 until November 9 1989, the Berlin Wall dominated every aspect of life in the city. Although less obvious, this influence continues today with Berlin effectively two cities divided by what is now largely an invisible and imagined boundary (see Richie 1999 for a general overview of the city’s recent past). Traces do survive from the Cold War era in Berlin, notably sections of the Wall and watchtowers, but also more subtly within the modern townscape aspects of design and layout, architectural styles etc, and some artistic interventions – beyond the painted wall panels – which together represent an archaeology of difference, of ambivalence. These traces continue to reflect and represent the former distinctions between East and West – Berlin as a microcosm of the geopolitical and ideological divide that characterised the second half of the twentieth century. This legacy has cultural significance as a result, offering a means to interpret the Cold War in an unprecedented, immediate and spectacular way, embracing the many political, military and social contexts that characterised this era (Dolf-Bonckaemper nd).

This essay examines the meaning of Berlin’s Cold War legacy, and notably the Wall itself, as a Cold War landscape – physical and cognitive: a psychogeography of political space but drawing on personal memories to give that space immediacy and meaning. The processes of change will be briefly described alongside the motivations of city planners that have led to the limited survival of obvious extant traces of Cold War Berlin in the modern city, thus creating a greater reliance upon the intangible heritage that remains. The role of community will also be considered – how does popular opinion changed since 1989 about the character of the city and the significance of its recent past? To what extent, for example, do Berliners and others now regret the near-total removal of the Wall, an event of course which itself symbolised global geopolitics and culture change in the immediately post-Cold War world. Was the removal of the Wall a mistake, though an understandable one in the heat of the moment? What can be done now to retain its place in popular memory? Is reconstruction or part rebuilding an option, or could contemporary artistic interventions fulfill this role in a more effective (a more affective) way? But before going on to discuss materiality in this physical sense, I will draw on my own experiences to assess how far this Cold War landscape was one of myth and le Carré fiction. How ‘hot’ was Cold War Berlin?

Berlin 1971-1973

So, this is my story; my own memories from when I lived in Berlin for over two years, between ages nine and eleven, in the British sector, and with a father who had a significant role in Signals and Intelligence on the hill in the Grunewald know as Teufelsberg. This was his domain, managing the work of 26 Signals Unit, listening in on the enemy and translating its published and captured works. My memories of Berlin at that time remain clear, and reflect the diversity of social and political contexts that shaped my world. Following the end of World War II, Berlin was divided into four sectors: British, French, American and Russian and it was these that shaped Berlin’s Cold War history, and the lives of its inhabitants. For two years in the early 1970s that included us. On Sundays we sometimes travelled to other sectors for lunch: the French Maison de Carte for a long lunch of many courses, where I had escargot for the first time, and natural yoghurt, and sat seemingly for hours while others talked. I remember the cobbled streets and architecture which I remember thinking was ‘very French’, though I had never been to France and of course it was German anyway. But I picked up that the feel of the place, its essence, its personality, was French: road names, and voices, and the smells of French cuisine. And then the American sector, where we used to shop and buy T-shirts, and attend picnics hosted by the American servicemen on their camp. It was at one of these picnics that I had my first beef burger; and I remember noticing the very different personality, attitude and behaviour of the average American serviceman. They seemed to joke more than we did; their sense of humour was less subtle than our own, and they drank from bottles. My father also worked at one time with an Italian whose wife was an opera singer. They lived in a flat somewhere in the city where we once went for dinner. She breast-fed her baby at the dinner table and there were huge cages of birds – green and goldfinches mainly – in some of the living rooms. The Italian couple were both very expressive. I loved the dark corridors and tiled floors of their flat, and the birds caged high above the city streets, behind their own “Berlin wall”. We also had some...
German friends, including a retired Naval commander. Once at dinner at his villa on the banks of the River Havel he presented me with a box of miniature lead German ships; one of every class in the wartime German Navy. I still have them, of course.

And then at least twice my mother took me into the East, in a British staff car, with a military police escort. We passed from the West through Checkpoint Charlie, amidst all the usual checks. They looked at our passports and then our faces through the car's closed windows. I stood on the nearly deserted Unter den Linden, just beyond the Brandenburg Gate — in another world — and had my photograph taken. Separately — on an organised coach tour I think — we visited the Soviet War Memorial at Treptow and I was too frightened to leave my mother and visit the men's toilets. A stern-looking middle-aged woman was cleaning out the ladies'. My mother confidently approached her and asked in her broken German if we could both go in together. The cleaner looked at me and must have taken pity. Her stern expression was replaced by a warm smile as she ushered us both in. She understood.

While my mother and I were together in the East my feelings were of immense excitement, though my mother, I suspect, was apprehensive. Once there was a danger of us becoming separated I became concerned, as at Treptow and at the large museums where I feared us just losing each other in the cavernous spaces and labyrinthine networks of galleries. I remember at least once having nightmares about this. My father was strictly forbidden from going to the East, because of the dangers of capture and interrogation. My mother has told me that she was briefed about what not to say if captured. My father was from South Africa, and I am not certain. But one time we stopped to buy some porcelain. My mother and I went into the shop with one of our escort, the other remaining in the car. The East German car pulled up behind ours, and the two men came to the shop window. I clearly remember looking out of the window at the two men looking in. Our eyes met. I thought of them as the enemy, and didn't smile. They looked back at me, straight-faced. I felt no fear; just a kind of exhilaration.

As well as porcelain I also remember my mother buying a Russian hat for my father, and one for my older brother, also in the RAF at that time. My mother also bought one for me, though I hadn't noticed that. My brother came to stay for Christmas and we were all given our hats. We all then stood for a photograph, in the garden of our house.

My father often had visitors from England (I used to tell schoolfriends we had VIPs staying with us). Some I now know were from GCHQ — signals and intelligence staff I presume, though I never knew. My parents used to entertain them, usually with a restaurant dinner in central (West) Berlin, and a tour of the Wall at night. When I was slightly older I was allowed to go too. After a pizza we travelled to the Wall, and looked over into the East, late at night, from some of the various viewing platforms that existed then. The guards trained their binoculars on us, and the dogs in the Death Strip barked. Otherwise it seemed all the noise, of a city continuing to live through the night, came from the West; the East was silent and eerie; even more so than it was during the day.

Once some friends stayed the night at our house on RAF Gatow, some 3-4 miles from the border with East Germany. One morning my mother took a tray of tea into their bedroom; they were sitting upright in bed and terrified. They had been woken at about 4 am by the sound of machine gun fire, which had sounded close as the wind was from the west. We were used to it. Machine gun fire always sounded when there were escape attempts.

There was much cultural diversity within Cold War Berlin, which I am pleased to have experienced. This diversity manifested itself not only in the different nationalities present within the city, but also within the service environment in which I spent most of my time. Socially for example officer's families rarely mixed with those of other ranks, and similarly there was little contact — for the children certainly — between Army and Royal Air Force Families. I recently revisited Berlin with my own family and took them to swim at the outdoor Olympic Swimming Pool, constructed for the 1936 Olympic Games. They loved it, and I asked my mother whether I had even been there. 'Oh no, dear — that's where the army families swam; we had the [RAF] Officer's Club!'

But children of my age did mix at school, and my particular friends were from army backgrounds, and lower ranks in the army at that. I still remember most of their names. But it was an odd friendship because we only ever met at school. One weekend I invited my two best friends around to my house to play (my parents had agreed, I suspect reluctantly). But as it turned out their parents were even less happy about their boys visiting the son of the man running 26 SU, and they didn't turn up. That's how it was. Social class reflected by service rank was rarely overcome. Out of school I tended to play with the girls that lived in the flat upstairs and the house next door. In school it was the army boys. Two separate worlds; the story of the city.
Finally, when we left Berlin, my mother and I flew to England. My father drove with the car and caravan, the caravan filled with some of our possessions. As always he had a police escort for the two-hour drive from Berlin, through East to West Germany. One police car at the front; one at the back. We knew he was leaving Berlin at dawn, and due in England late that evening. But he didn’t turn up when we expected him to, and had heard nothing from him. My mother and I were staying with my sister. I recall in the middle of the night a knock on the front door. I was in the bedroom above and heard my mother hurry downstairs. A policeman was at the door and conveyed a very short message, which was all he had received. To tell my mother that my father had had an accident in East Germany. I was very scared, and feared the worst, though wasn’t sure what that was. Early next morning though a more detailed message came through, that the car had broken an axle on the pot holes in the autobahn, and that—having a car and caravan—the only means of rescue was a tank transporter. So he had set all day, playing cards with his armed police escort and reading Agatha Christie books, waiting for the transporter to arrive. He had then been taken to West Germany. He refused to return to Berlin after so many had turned out at dawn to wave him off.

The reason I present these reminiscences is that they convey a sense of the place at around that time, early 1970s, albeit through the eyes of an eleven-year-old living in the context of a service environment. They represent a form of cognitive map of the place, and the emotions that it still provokes 50 years on. My impression was always one of exhilaration, and also of the richness and the diversity of life in the city. But the heat from the Cold War, while rarely frightening, was real: police escorts, important— but nameless—guests, border guards, machine gun fire at night. Looking back, and reading Timothy Garton Ash’s book The File (1997), in which a journalist recently gained access to the now publicly available files held by the Stasi (the East German secret police), and read what they had to say about him, how they recorded every movement of his and every person he met, some of whom were in fact agents, it seems likely that there are also files about my mother, my father, and perhaps me too, recording the dates of our journeys through the ‘corridor’ of East Germany on holiday, and our day trips into East Berlin (we could presumably find out who those men were that followed us).

For some, Cold War Berlin was more myth than reality; rather it seemed unreal because across much of West Berlin the Cold War was hidden from view. It was only at the edges and beyond that it became tangible: on the border, or as the U-bahn passed through the East and through the stations which were darkened, allowing those on the train to glimpse East German soldiers with guns, standing on the platform; and of course with the Russian soldiers at the war memorial just on the West, beyond the Brandenburg Gate, and with the continued presence of Rudolph Hess in Spandau Prison. But for those German families separated by the Wall, or for those with friends on the other side, it was real enough. And for those who died trying to escape, and their relatives, and for the border guards, and for the servicemen, of whichever nation. For all the citizens of the East it was real enough too, and they had the Stasi to contend with: many were bribed into becoming informants; to befriend people suspected of having western sympathies, and then hand over this information to the Stasi. For East Berliners the Wall was far more than just physical containment, as we now know from the availability of Stasi archives.

Berlin has now become a significant place in modern popular culture, being one of the key places, in fact or fiction, for conveying the atmosphere and events of the Cold War. A le Carré landscape adding to the many other layers of meaning and memory, some of which are painful and difficult for the German people to accommodate. One preserved stretch of the Wall for example runs alongside one of the more significant—and notorious—Nazi sites, creating some confusion in the minds of visitors, and forcing comparison between the Nazis and the Stasi (Dolff-Bonsaemper, ‘Sites’).

The legacy

Some thoughts now on the Wall itself, about which much has been written, notably by Polly Feversham and Leo Schmidt, in Their Berlin Wall Today. Some of the key points about the construction, use and destruction of the Wall are covered in that book and just a few basic facts follow. The Wall was built in 1961 and proceeded to dominate every aspect of life in the city for 28 years. As Feversham and Schmidt have said, it was a complex, ever-changing and constantly evolving structure, incorporating many architectural and non-architectural elements. There were various clear stages: the first being the barrier that went up on the night of 13 August 1961. This was Kruschev’s ‘serpentine barbed wire’ which comprised 155 km of borderline around West Berlin. The second stage came two days later with the construction of a solid barrier of blocks, beams and railings about 2 m high. During this time it was still possible for friends and relatives to wave at each other across the obstacles, and indeed for people to escape. But the construction of a death strip system, in conjunction with a second or hinterland wall from June 1962 put an end to this. Often houses—people’s homes let us not forget—were forcibly evacuated and demolished. In Bernauer Strasse for example five or six-storey tenements were bricked up and later demolished following evacuation. Before this, many spectacular and well publicised escapes took place through these windows. Barbed wire fences and obstacles defined the eastern limit of the death strip and watchtowers became a prominent feature; 130 towers were built in the first year alone.

Figure 3 My father, brother and I in our garden in Berlin, Christmas Day 1972 with our new Russian hats.
From 1965 onwards these improvised fortifications of the first and second generation walls were superseded. It was built now of prefabricated elements specifically made for this purpose. Also the death strip was perfected and other obstacles laid to prevent escape. Now, from the East, there was the hinterland wall, an electrified signal fence, obstacles and netting concealing steel spikes, watchtowers, a light strip and patrol road, the control strip, and an anti-vehicle ditch. Finally, the wall itself, of concrete slabs horizontally inserted between steel girder or concrete posts, topped with lengths of pipe. It was now virtually impossible to scale. Interestingly, although officially called the Anti-Fascist Protection Ramp by the East Germans, it did in fact face East, thus preventing the exodus of East German citizens rather than intrusions from the West.

Even more refinements came later with the fourth generation wall, which was higher and had a forward blocking element to protect it from attacks from the West. Most of what remains of the Wall belong to this fourth generation. However, what does survive is very little, at least in terms of obvious physical traces. Less than two kilometres survive of the Wall itself, along with a handful of watchtowers, these together representing a symbol of opposition and meaning many things to many people: as Feversham and Schmidt have said, for some it was, 'a cinema screen on which the projected anxieties of the West flickered and danced; for others it was a gallery of graffiti art, a locus of death and tragedy, a ruin, an absence, a memory, a void.' The Berlin Wall is in effect a text – there can be no single reading (1999, 14).

And on 9 November 1989 the Wall was breached; over the coming days and weeks it was largely removed, amidst a general view amongst Berliners, and others, that the Wall must disappear and disappear quickly. And this is effectively what happened, with pieces of Wall becoming collectibles overnight, both as fragments, and whole panels which were auctioned off and shipped around the world. Everywhere I travel I see these panels of the Berlin Wall: at the BMW IMAX Cinema in Cape Town, the Imperial War Museum in London, and the gent's urinals in the Main Street Station Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas. Feversham and Schmidt say that nothing represents the triumph of the oppressed as cogently as the ruined symbol of their oppression, and here the fragments bespeak our deliverance from the Cold War (1999, 14).

**Philosophy and the process of change**

So, in the years after 1989, what has been the process of change, and of changing attitudes towards the Wall? Certainly the initial response was – understandably – to remove all trace. It was torn down in a destructive rage. Everyone wanted to be rid of the imprisoning Wall. Everyone joined in, or sympathised at least with the actions of those destroying the Wall. Few if any suggested conservation or retention, though it was said that an act of emancipation will gradually become an act of historical suppression if the last pieces of the Wall are not preserved (see Dolf-Bonekaemper, ‘Berlin Wall’).

Discussions about preservation were held however amongst the city planners and conservation bodies. This was clearly a monument of international importance, being destroyed by a vast and unstoppable crowd before their eyes. The first thought was that it would be enough to merely reconnect interrupted streets and tie together the urban relations that had been torn apart in 1961. The feeling was that the Wall, with all its elements, could be left to slowly decay.

A compromise with the majority view to tear down the Wall in its entirety, and the view to save sections of it, was to preserve a few significant parts, giving future visitors and Berliners at least some original fabric to experience. This was achieved in the end, but not without opposition. Local authorities and politicians claimed for Berliners the right to no longer see the anti-Fascist Protection Ramp by the East Germans, it did in fact face East, thus preventing the exodus of East German citizens rather than intrusions from the West.

Two watchtowers were also protected (see Dolf-Bonekaemper, ‘Berlin Wall’, for further details).

Berlin is a city in transition. It has become the new capital city of a unified Germany, and in the area close to the Reichstag is the largest building site in Europe, as areas previously in no-man’s-land are developed to accommodate the German parliament. And inevitably these changes mean that traces of Germany’s past are removed, whether from the war years, or from the Cold War. Some key traces have survived, though these only contribute in part to representing Berlin’s Cold War legacy.

**The Wall in popular memory**

Beyond these more obvious traces is the impact the Wall has had, and continues to have, on people’s memories. The Wall is a monument of international importance, being destroyed by a vast and unstoppable crowd before their eyes. The first thought was that it would be enough to merely reconnect interrupted streets and tie together the urban relations that had been torn apart in 1961. The feeling was that the Wall, with all its elements, could be left to slowly decay.

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have, on the structure and feel of the city; of its personality and the personalities of its inhabitants. And of the degree to which the memory of the Wall can be retained without the need for the monument itself. Accepting that authenticity is a major consideration here (in form and material; in spatiality and spatial context), reconstructing the Wall is never going to be a serious consideration, whether in- or ex-situ. Similarly for repairs to the existing structure, and conservation of the art work upon it. There's also the question about which phase of the Wall should be conserved, the Wall having constantly been in a state of flux: changing and evolving, and subject to careful and regular maintenance. It was as much a process as a structure and, of course, in a process there is no final moment (Feversham and Schmidt 1999).

So rather than look to wholesale or even large-scale reconstruction and conservation of the original fabric, part of the answer to these related issues, and the need to retain memory of the wall as a focus for action and attentions, should be sought by other means, significant amongst which is artistic intervention (after Feversham and Schmidt 1999).

Since 1961 the Wall has been the focus of many creative acts: flowers, wreaths, and crosses at the sites of escape attempts for example; graffiti and artistic projects to represent the line and the memory of the Wall. The graffiti is well known, some is famous, and all has become synonymous with the Wall, the images used in popular media nearly always being decorated panels. But the graffiti has a significance beyond just its aesthetic qualities. It highlights the dichotomy in the use and perception of the border between East and West. The face to the East was blank, pristine, a reflection of military order and control. That facing West was rotously anarchic; it was a multi-coloured canvas of personal expression and protest. The graffiti started to appear in 1988 when student protest movements began using the Wall as a billboard for publicising dissent and dissatisfaction. However, it wasn't until the smoother fourth generation Wall that artistic intervention really began. Interestingly, these interventions were in the end responsible for the preservation (often ex-situ) of many sections of the Wall that would otherwise have been destroyed. Some famous artists have their work painted on the Wall – Keith Haring for example. But the point about the significance of graffiti is an important one: it secured the preservation of wall sections, here and around the world, and the painted Wall, now represented at East Side Gallery featuring work by 118 artists from 21 countries, became a symbol of Berlin and a significant stop on the tourist trail. Also, the spontaneity of this art makes it a living element in the modern community, and is available to all. The act of painting the Wall represents a symbolic act of the past that can continue into the future. Leaving these paintings alone will simply ensure their rapid deterioration and loss; repainting draws in various arguments about loss of authenticity. However, large format photography of the originals and the continued intervention of young artists, creating new art and adapting the old, enables a continuity that has much to recommend it.

A greater degree of permanence can be seen in some artistic projects. One project for example translates as 'Rabbit Sign', by Karla Sachse. Recalling their 'peaceful subversion of the border strip', 120 life-size silhouettes of rabbits cut from sheet brass were stuck onto the surface of streets and pavements on the site of a former border crossing. These recall an East German children's club run by a friend of Sachse's which held rabbit parties and raised a rabbit flag, an oblique reference to the German expression 'showing the rabbit flag', or running away (the significance of which the Stasi never realised). Also, and more significantly, they represent the rabbits that occupied the death strip – not heavy enough to interfere with trip wires, the rabbits thrived in this 'safe' environment (Feversham and Schmidt 1999, 156).

Finally, the Checkpoint Charlie site is now marked by tall steel pillars, one displaying the luminous photographic image of an American soldier facing East, and the other a Soviet soldier facing West. Most traces of this infamous border crossing, the one I passed through as a small boy in 1971-73, with my mother and police escort, have now gone.

**Summary**

Berlin is a fascinating city, where the Cold War was perhaps at its hottest. It was also a city Feversham and Schmidt describe as being the focus of shimmering anxiety. Nikita Krushchev described it as the testicles of the West; 'When I want the West to scream', he said, 'I squeeze on Berlin.' The Cold War was very real, for all who visited and lived in the city – clearly perceptions varied according to circumstance but there were none who were not touched in some way. After all just to reach Berlin involved passing through the communist East. And what remains today, and despite the events and changes of 1989, and subsequently, is not the massive barrier that was the Berlin Wall and the social and political distinctions that it imposed on the city, but rather the more challenging and often subtle traces of that recent past: regional distinctiveness reflected for example in British street names and signage on what is now a German military base, after the British forces withdrew some ten years ago; the many museums and interpretation centres that tell this story; Cold War artefacts sold on the streets.

![Figure 5](image)  
**Figure 5** Signs. As well as OC [Officer Commanding] 26 SU, my father was also Deputy Station Commander. So, for a time, this was one of his parking spaces on the former RAF Gatow. The sign remains ten years after the German Army replaced the RAF.
(medals, Russian hats etc, and of course pieces of the Wall itself); the materiality, including the Wall where this survives; and attempts to represent this past through artistic projects, both ad hoc and organised. Combined with intangible elements, such as the cognitive ‘map’ presented here, these traces tell the story of Cold War Berlin in both an effective and affective way, despite the absence of most of its most symbolic and significant monument, the Berlin Wall, the border itself. This could never have been retained in anything like its original form, and the balance that now exists – with personal memories creating a complex landscape of enspirited places, alongside artistic representations of collective and personal memory, and a few sites and monuments to serve as touchstones – may be sufficiently sustainable and informative to ensure the story continues to be told, and this landscape of ambivalence continues to be legible, for many years to come.

Acknowledgements

This is the third in a trilogy of papers which explore the social context of war and conflict: the social commemoration of warfare (following Schofield in press and unpublished). I am grateful to the organisers of the Islands of Vanishment conference for persuading me to tell these stories, to English Heritage for enabling me to attend, to Leo Schmidt for allowing me to borrow some of the ideas from his own work, and to various conference delegates for their thoughts and comments on my presentation. I am also indebted to my mother for sharing memories with me on a recent return visit to Berlin. The paper is dedicated to the memory of my father, Gp Cpt Arthur Schofield, who died in 2001, ironically while I was in Berlin exploring some of the ideas and places that form the basis of this paper.

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