

East German Perspectives: The Berlin Wall and its Evolution as Cultural Heritage

Annabelle Mauri

In a Tortoiseshell: *In her paper examining changing perceptions of the Berlin Wall in the aftermath of the Cold War, Annabelle Mauri mines an extensive field of **primary and secondary sources**, including archives, statistics, and existing scholarly discussions. Annabelle skillfully weaves these sources together to build her own argument, which highlights the strategic political erasure of East German perspectives on the Wall in the process of reunification, and how that erasure contributed to the West German-led redefinition of the Berlin Wall as a symbol of unity and peace. In doing so, she boldly establishes her unique voice in a conversation about an oft-studied historical monument.*

Excerpt

The disappearance of East German experiences from the public awareness affected how the Berlin Wall was viewed, and without this disappearance, our current understanding of the Wall would likely have been much different. Scholar Frederick Baker sees an important distinction between the two sides of the Wall, distinguishing between the Western ‘Wand,’ a word that means simply ‘wall,’ and the Eastern ‘Mauer,’ which refers specifically to the heavily guarded border between East and West Germany that restricted freedom for so many years.[1] The ‘Wand’ existed for West Germans, of course, but it did not represent their oppression or lack of opportunity the way the ‘Mauer’ did for East Germans. This distinction suggests that the effects of the Wall on Germans’ everyday life differed greatly between East and West, making it impossible for the Wall to be perceived and represented in media in the same way in both countries. This difference also casts new meaning on the Wall’s seemingly strange evolution as cultural heritage. The image of the Wall as a symbol of unity makes more sense for those who experienced it as the ‘Wand.’ But for those for whom the Wall was the ‘Mauer,’ it must be difficult to overlook the decades when the Wall meant the exact opposite of freedom. But how exactly did the Western, ‘Wand’ perspective come to dominate the Eastern, ‘Mauer’ perspective?

The push during reunification to forget certain no-longer-desired aspects of the past had far greater consequences than simply promoting unity: it also served to suppress East German perspectives on their own history. Dirk Kurbjuweit, a writer for *Der Spiegel*, outlined the grim expectations that some East Germans held for their future as a part of West Germany:

Nothing will remain of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), and its citizens will have to submit to a foreign lifestyle. The East is taken over, an event the revolutionaries welcomed with open arms – but it’s a hostile takeover, an obliteration and eradication of what the eastern part of Germany once was. West Germany will simply expand... Such were the expectations after the euphoria of the revolution... had dissipated.[2]

This disillusion continues today, as Thomas Kruger, the German President of the Federal Agency for Civic Education and a former East German, remarked in 2016: “The domination of West Germans in the elites is still felt as cultural colonialism.”[3] Although the current chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel, is East German, Kruger does have a point: according to *Deutsche Welle*, “only 1.7 percent of leadership positions in politics, business, or academia were occupied by people of East German origin in 2016,”[4] despite the fact that, when Germany was reunified in 1990, around 20% of the total population was East German.[5] [6] This power imbalance has had very real ramifications for many East Germans, such as Jana Hensel, who was still a child during reunification.[7] In her autobiography, Hensel writes that in the 15 years after the Mauerfall, “everything...changed. The Wall came down, the GDR was swallowed up by the West, and my childhood disappeared.”[8]

It is clear that, had East German perspectives been given more weight, the legacy of the Wall would have been different. Hope Harrison explains that “the last session of the East German parliament, the Volkskammer, voted on 2 October 1990 to grant the one-block-long section of remaining Wall at Bernauer Strasse...landmark historic preservation status,”[9] which was in stark contrast with the unified Berlin Senate, who voted in 1992 not to preserve remnants of the Wall. The decision to ignore the remains of the Wall was part of the push after reunification to promote unity at the expense of acknowledging the past, and this difference in opinion shows another instance in which West Germans was able to decide how to deal with the Wall.

[1] Baker, *The Berlin Wall*. 45.

[2] Kurbjuweit, “The Merkel Effect.”

[3] Knight, “East Germans Still Victims of ‘cultural Colonialism’ by the West | DW | 01.11.2017.”

[4] Knight, “East Germans Still Victims of ‘cultural Colonialism’ by the West | DW | 01.11.2017.”

[5] “East Germany - New World Encyclopedia.”

[6] “West Germany - New World Encyclopedia.”

[7] Hensel, Jana, *After the Wall: Confessions from an East German Childhood and the Life That Came Next*. New York: Public Affairs, 2004, 12.

[8] Hensel, *After the Wall*, 12.

[9] Harrison, "The Berlin Wall and Its Reconstruction as a Site of Memory," 87.

Author Commentary
Annabelle Mauri

When I began writing this paper, I was completely overwhelmed by the sheer amount of available information about and sources pertaining to the Berlin Wall. I found a mountain of scholarly articles, interviews, biographies, newspaper articles, photographs, encyclopedia entries, movies, and books from across a period of decades that dealt with the Wall from many different perspectives, from political to artistic to personal and more. Needless to say, I had no idea where to begin.

Luckily, my Writing Seminar professor, Dr. Emma Ljung, was there to help me. She helped me choose specific types of source material to focus on in the beginning: articles and photographs related to the Wall that appeared in German magazines and newspapers around the time of the Mauerfall and the following few years. Through the University library, I had access to a number of databases of historical newspapers, and many current newspapers have made their archives accessible online, such as *Die Zeit*.

First, though, I had to do a lot of background reading in order to understand the topic I was researching. To start, I had found the call number of one book that I was interested in and went to find it in the stacks. I ended up staying there long after I'd found my book because there were so many other books on my topic on the same shelf, some of which were even more pertinent to my research question. Once I had accumulated a number of sources and was ready to read through them, I started keeping a research journal, which was a suggestion from one of the presenters at the Mary W. George Freshman Research Conference. In addition, for each book or scholarly article, I would put a sticky note on the cover with a few notes about what each author's main points or arguments were, as well as interesting statistics or facts that I hadn't seen in other sources and intriguing quotes. This tactic ended up being extremely helpful as I began to draft my paper, both in terms of being able to cite easily and accurately, and also in terms of finding a way to engage in a conversation with my sources. As a result, I was able to create and then revise my thesis since my evidence was well-organized.

Once I'd developed a basic understanding of my topic and looked at many newspapers and images from the time period, Dr. Ljung encouraged me to incorporate different types of sources that could add something new to my argument. This included current newspaper articles about the commemoration of the Mauerfall today or statistics about the lingering disparities between former East and West German citizens. It also included current opinion pieces about the Fall and an autobiography of a woman who grew up in East Germany.

Throughout the entire writing process, Zotero, a program that creates citations and helps organize sources, was extremely helpful, and it made creating a Works Cited really easy. All in all, I learned that finding and using a variety of sources, as well as thinking about how to keep them organized, made my paper more interesting and fun to write.

Editor Commentary

Catherine Wang

Days after returning from a trip to Berlin, I read Annabelle's essay for the first time. What I realized immediately was that she had identified a question about the Berlin Wall that I had not thought to question, nor seen others question. This, to me, was the sign of an exciting research question for a paper on a universally recognizable historical moment. In her essay, Annabelle analyzes the changing perception of the Berlin Wall after the Cold War, examining *why an object that signified death and division can now be a symbol of unity and freedom*. However, this question is a research challenge for any writer to take on. How can perceptions of the Wall be measured and compared? A writer would need to find a way to examine both East and West German perspectives during the Cold War as well as in the aftermath of the Cold War, a daunting task to cover in just a ten page research paper.

However, Annabelle's essay takes on this challenging scope with dexterity, effectively synthesizing a broad range of primary and secondary sources to support a rich and nuanced argument. In this excerpt, which focuses on perspectives in the transition period around the fall of the wall, she starts by bringing in a scholar, Frederick Baker, to support her argument about how the wall was viewed differently between West and East Germany. As she points out using Baker, the West Germans and East Germans' linguistic differences when referencing the wall ('Wand' vs. 'Mauer') reflect different perceptions of the wall. She asks, if the West Germans used the broader term '*Wand*,' while East Germans used '*Mauer*' to specifically reference the heavily guarded border between East and West Germany, why the '*Wand*'-perspective became the dominant perspective in the aftermath of the fall of the wall. This question allows her to effectively transition from referencing other scholarly sources to bringing in unique primary sources.

Annabelle calls upon her extensive research to answer her own question about the dominance of the '*Wand*'-perspective, incorporating newspaper archives to trace themes of East German disillusionment with reunification as well as statistics about voting decisions and political appointments in the aftermath of reunification. These sources allow her to build an argument that highlights the strategic political erasure of East German perspectives on the Wall in the process of reunification, and how that erasure contributed to the West German-led redefinition of the Berlin Wall as a symbol of unity and peace. Her thorough research and source use ultimately allows her to build an argument that adds significant nuance to the existing

scholarly explanations for changing perception of the Berlin Wall, which had broadly referenced the economic benefits of tourism and the Wall's political potential.

In taking on a question of such challenging scope, and then zooming up close in her research by piecing together narratives from archives, statistics, and other scholarly discussions, Annabelle boldly establishes her unique voice in a conversation about an oft-studied historical monument.

Professor Commentary
Emma Ljung, Princeton Writing Program

Research Beyond Walls

Historically, walls have been built to keep animals in and humans out. They have also been built to demarcate space: to separate *this* place from *that* place, and to make visible to any viewer that this place is not that place, no matter their numerous similarities. Historically, numerous walls have failed to achieve these lofty goals. For that reason alone, the Berlin Wall is an anomaly. Before its erection in 1961, 3.5 million East Germans defected to the West, a number that dwindled to a mere 5,000 in the period 1961 to 1989. This wall – this *Mauer* – so successful in restricting movement, has become a symbol of divided Germany and its unification. But despite the Wall being an East German creation, current narratives that surround it predominantly advocate a Western perspective: concepts of liberation, of unification, of freedom. Such slogans, Annabelle noticed, are at odds with East German experiences. And even more strangely, East Germany wanted to preserve the physical structure almost immediately after *Mauerfall*, but the West – for whom the structure eventually became a symbol of unity and power – had no interest in doing so. Why would the people for whom the Wall represented oppression want to preserve the structure? What has happened between *Mauerfall* in 1989 and today that has enabled the narrative of unification to completely suppress the narrative of loss? The Berlin Wall, despite the wealth of research on these 140 kilometers of fencing, seems oddly misunderstood. In her research, Annabelle had to not only overcome research walls – few late 1980s East German newspapers are accessible in the US – but also a series of scholarly walls, especially in terms of tacit assumptions. The vast majority of her sources simply assumed that East and West German perspectives were the same – German. But to Annabelle, the more interesting questions were the ones that no one seemed to ask: the questions that forced her to go beyond those scholarly walls to a place most scholars did not even know existed. And it is because of that impetus that this research paper is not only successful, but *important*. Annabelle shows us that this Wall that kept people in, that divided *this* place from *that* place, is in fact not simply *a* wall at all, but both *Mauer* and *Wand*: a single structure embodying a multiplicity of identities.

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Bios

Catherine Wang '19 is a senior in the Operations Research and Financial Engineering department. When she's not coding or doing psets, she's writing. She is a Writing Center Head Fellow, former Editor-in-Chief of *Tortoise*, and current managing editor of *Unfound: The Asian American Studies Journal*.

Annabelle Mauri '22 is a first year from Massachusetts. She enjoys traveling, learning foreign languages, and spending time with her friends. She wrote this essay in a Writing Seminar called "The Fragmented Past."