

= Inner German border =

The inner German border (German : innerdeutsche Grenze or deutsch @-@ deutsche Grenze ; initially also Zonengrenze) was the border between the German Democratic Republic (GDR , East Germany) and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG , West Germany) from 1949 to 1990 . Not including the similar but physically separate Berlin Wall , the border was 1 @,@ 393 kilometres (866 mi) long and ran from the Baltic Sea to Czechoslovakia .

It was formally established on 1 July 1945 as the boundary between the Western and Soviet occupation zones of former Nazi Germany . On the eastern side , it was made one of the world 's most heavily fortified frontiers , defined by a continuous line of high metal fences and walls , barbed wire , alarms , anti @-@ vehicle ditches , watchtowers , automatic booby traps and minefields . It was patrolled by 50 @,@ 000 armed GDR guards who faced tens of thousands of West German , British and US guards and soldiers . In the hinterlands behind the border were more than a million North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and Warsaw Pact troops .

The border was a physical manifestation of Winston Churchill 's metaphorical Iron Curtain that separated the Soviet and Western blocs during the Cold War . It marked the boundary between two ideological systems ? capitalism and communism . Built by East Germany in phases from 1952 to the late 1980s , the fortifications were constructed to stop the large @-@ scale emigration of East German citizens to the West , about 1 @,@ 000 of whom are said to have died trying to cross it during its 45 @-@ year existence . It caused widespread economic and social disruption on both sides ; East Germans living in the region suffered especially draconian restrictions .

The better @-@ known Berlin Wall was a physically separate , less elaborate , and much shorter border barrier surrounding West Berlin , more than 155 kilometres (96 mi) to the east of the inner German border (Berlin having been similarly divided by the four powers after World War II , despite the entire city being in the Soviet zone , thus creating an enclave of capitalism surrounded by East German territory) . On 9 November 1989 , the East German government announced the opening of the Berlin Wall and the inner German border . Over the following days , millions of East Germans poured into the West to visit . Hundreds of thousands moved permanently to the West in the following months as more crossings were opened , and ties between long @-@ divided communities were re @-@ established as border controls became little more than a cursory formality . The inner German border was not completely abandoned until 1 July 1990 , exactly 45 years to the day since its establishment , and only three months before German reunification formally ended Germany 's division .

Little remains of the inner German border 's fortifications . Its route has been declared part of a " European Green Belt " linking national parks and nature reserves along the course of the old Iron Curtain from the Arctic Circle to the Black Sea . Museums and memorials along the old border commemorate the division and reunification of Germany and , in some places , preserve elements of the fortifications .

= = Development = =

= = = Origins = = =

The inner German border originated from the Second World War Allies ' plans to divide a defeated Germany into occupation zones . The boundaries between these zones were drawn along the territorial boundaries of 19th @-@ century German states and provinces that had largely disappeared with the unification of Germany in 1871 . Three zones were agreed on , each covering roughly a third of Germany 's territories : a British zone in the north @-@ west , an American zone in the south and a Soviet zone in the East . France was later given a zone in the far west of Germany , carved out of the British and American zones .

The division of Germany was put into effect on 1 July 1945 . Because of their unexpectedly rapid advances through central Germany in the final weeks of the war , British and American troops

occupied large areas of territory that had been assigned to the Soviet zone of occupation . The redeployment of Western troops prompted many Germans to flee to the West to escape the Soviet takeover of the remainder of the Soviet zone .

The wartime Allies initially worked together under the auspices of the Allied Control Council (ACC) for Germany . Cooperation between the Western Allies and the Soviets ultimately broke down because of disagreements over Germany 's political and economic future . In May 1949 , the three western occupation zones were merged to form the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) with a freely elected government . The Soviet zone became the German Democratic Republic (GDR) , under communist rule .

From the outset , West Germany and the Allies rejected East Germany 's legitimacy . The creation of East Germany was deemed a communist / Soviet fait accompli , without a freely or fairly elected government . West Germany regarded German citizenship and rights as applying equally to East and West German citizens . An East German who escaped or was released to the West was automatically granted West German rights , including residence and the right to work ; West German laws were deemed to be applicable in the East . East Germans thus had a powerful incentive to move to the West , where they would enjoy greater freedom and economic prospects . The East German government sought to define the country as a legitimate state in its own right and portrayed West Germany as enemy territory (feindliches Ausland) ? a capitalist , semi @-@ fascist state that exploited its citizens , sought to regain the lost territories of the Third Reich , and stood opposed to the peaceful socialism of the GDR .

= = = 1945 ? 52 : the " Green Border " = = =

In the early days of the occupation , the Allies controlled traffic between the zones to manage the flow of refugees and prevent the escape of former Nazi officials and intelligence officers . These controls were gradually lifted in the Western zones , but were tightened between Western and Soviet zones in 1946 to stem a flow of economic and political refugees from the Soviet zone . Between October 1945 and June 1946 , 1 @.@ 6 million Germans left the Soviet zone for the west .

The east ? west interzonal border became steadily more tense as the relationship between the Western Allies and the Soviets deteriorated . From September 1947 , an increasingly strict regime was imposed on the eastern Soviet zone boundary . The number of Soviet soldiers on the boundary was increased and supplemented with border guards from the newly established East German Volkspolizei (" People 's Police ") . Many unofficial crossing points were blocked with ditches and barricades . The West Germans also stepped up security with the establishment in 1952 of the Federal Border Protection force of 20 @,@ 000 men ? the Bundesgrenzschutz , or BGS ; however , Allied troops (the British in the north , the Americans in the south) retained responsibility for the military security of the border .

The boundary line was nonetheless still fairly easy to cross . Local inhabitants were able to maintain fields on the other side , or even to live on one side and work on the other . Refugees were able to sneak across or bribe the guards , and the smuggling of goods in both directions was rife . The flow of emigrants remained large despite the increase in East German security measures : 675 @,@ 000 people fled to West Germany between 1949 and 1952 .

= = = 1952 ? 67 : the " special regime " = = =

The relative openness of the border ended abruptly on 26 May 1952 , when the GDR implemented a " special regime on the demarcation line " , justified as a measure to keep out " spies , diversionists , terrorists and smugglers " . The East German move was taken to limit the continuing exodus of its citizens , which threatened the viability of the GDR 's economy .

A ploughed strip 10 m (32 @.@ 8 ft) wide was created along the entire length of the inner German border . An adjoining " protective strip " (Schutzstreifen) 500 m (1 @,@ 640 ft) wide was placed under tight control . A " restricted zone " (Sperrzone) a further 5 km (3 @.@ 1 mi) wide was

created in which only those holding a special permit could live or work . Trees and brush were cut down along the border to clear lines of sight for the guards and to eliminate cover for would @-@ be crossers . Houses adjoining the border were torn down , bridges were closed and barbed @-@ wire fencing was put up in many places . Farmers were permitted to work their fields along the border only in daylight hours and under the watch of armed guards , who were authorised to use weapons if their orders were not obeyed .

Border communities on both sides suffered acute disruption . Farms , coal mines and even houses were split in two by the sudden closure of the border . More than 8 @,@ 300 East German civilians living along the border were forcibly resettled in a programme codenamed " Operation Vermin " (Aktion Ungeziefer) . Another 3 @,@ 000 residents , realising that they were about to be expelled from their homes , fled to the West . The seal around the country was expanded in July 1962 , when the GDR declared its entire Baltic coast a border zone subject to closures and restrictions .

The border between East and West Berlin was also significantly tightened , although not fully closed ; East Germans were still able to cross into West Berlin , which then became the main route by which East Germans migrated to the West . Between 1949 and the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961 , an estimated 3 @.@ 5 million East Germans ? a sixth of the entire population ? emigrated to the West , most via Berlin . The railways between East Berlin and other important parts of East Germany went through West Berlin , so an easy way of going to West Berlin was leaving such a train . This railway configuration could not easily be changed , but a new 125 km (78 mi) long railway was built around West Berlin . Following the completion of Berlin outer ring in 1961 , sealing off the East German border with West Berlin became more feasible , and ultimately became a reality in August of that year .

= = = 1967 ? 89 : the " modern frontier " = = =

The GDR decided to upgrade the fortifications in the late 1960s to establish a " modern frontier " that would be far more difficult to cross . Barbed @-@ wire fences were replaced with harder @-@ to @-@ climb expanded metal barriers ; directional anti @-@ personnel mines and anti @-@ vehicle ditches blocked the movement of people and vehicles ; tripwires and electric signals helped guards to detect escapees ; all @-@ weather patrol roads enabled rapid access to any point along the border ; and wooden guard towers were replaced with prefabricated concrete towers and observation bunkers .

Construction of the new border system started in September 1967 . Nearly 1 @,@ 300 kilometres (808 mi) of new fencing was built , usually further back from the geographical line than the old barbed @-@ wire fences . The upgrade programme continued well into the 1980s . The new system immediately reduced the number of successful escapes from around 1 @,@ 000 people a year in the mid @-@ 1960s to only about 120 per year a decade later .

The introduction of West German Chancellor Willy Brandt 's Ostpolitik (" Eastern Policy ") at the end of the 1960s reduced tensions between the two German states . It led to a series of treaties and agreements in the early 1970s , most significantly a treaty in which East and West Germany recognised each other 's sovereignty and supported each other 's applications for UN membership , although East Germans leaving for the West retained the right to claim a West German passport . Reunification remained a theoretical objective for West Germany , but in practice that objective was put aside by the West and abandoned entirely by the East . New crossing points were established and East German crossing regulations were slightly relaxed , although the fortifications were as rigorously maintained as ever .

In 1988 , the GDR leadership considered proposals to replace the expensive and intrusive fortifications with a high @-@ technology system codenamed Grenze 2000 . Drawing on technology used by the Soviet Army during the Soviet ? Afghan War , it would have replaced the fences with sensors and detectors . However , the plan was never implemented .

= = Economic and social impact = =

The closure of the border had a substantial economic and social impact on both halves of Germany . Cross @-@ border transport links were largely severed ; 10 main railway lines , 24 secondary lines , 23 autobahns or national roads , 140 regional roads and thousands of smaller roads , paths and waterways were blocked or otherwise interrupted . The tightest level of closure came in 1966 , by which time only six railway lines , three autobahns , one regional road and two waterways were left open . When relations between the two states eased in the 1970s , the GDR agreed to open more crossing points in exchange for economic assistance . Telephone and mail communications operated throughout the Cold War , although packages and letters were routinely opened and telephone calls were monitored by the East German secret police .

The economic impact of the border was harsh . Many towns and villages were severed from their markets and economic hinterlands , which caused areas close to the border to go into an economic and demographic decline . The two German states responded to the problem in different ways . West Germany gave substantial subsidies to communities under the " Aid to border regions " programme , an initiative begun in 1971 to save them from total decline . Infrastructure and businesses along the border benefited from substantial state investment .

East Germany 's communities had a much harder time , because the country was poorer and their government imposed severe restrictions on them . The border region was progressively depopulated through the clearance of numerous villages and the forced relocation of their inhabitants . Border towns suffered draconian building restrictions : inhabitants were forbidden from building new houses and even repairing existing buildings , causing infrastructure to fall into severe decay . The state did little but to provide a 15 % income supplement to those living in the Sperrzone and Schutzstreifen ; but this did not halt the shrinkage of the border population , as younger people moved elsewhere to find employment and better living conditions .

The GDR bore a huge economic cost for its creation of the border zone and the building and maintenance of its fortifications . The zone consumed around 6 @, @ 900 square kilometres (2 @, @ 700 sq mi) ? more than six per cent of the East 's territory , within which economic activity was severely curtailed or ceased entirely . The actual cost of the border system was a closely guarded secret , and even today it is uncertain exactly how much it cost to build and maintain . The BT @-@ 9 watchtowers each cost around 65 @, @ 000 East German marks to build and the expanded metal fences cost around 151 @, @ 800 marks per kilometre . The implementation of the " modern frontier " in the 1970s led to a major increase in personnel costs . The total annual expenditure on GDR border troops rose from 600 million marks per annum in 1970 to nearly 1 billion by 1983 . In early 1989 , East German economists calculated that each arrest cost the equivalent of 2 @. @ 1 million marks , three times the average " value " to the state of each working person .

= = Views of the border = =

The two German governments promoted very different views of the border . The GDR saw it as the international frontier of a sovereign state ? a defensive rampart against Western aggression . In Grenzer (" Border Guard ") , a 1981 East German Army propaganda film , NATO and West German troops and tanks were depicted as ruthless militarists advancing towards East Germany . Border troops interviewed in the film described what they saw as the rightfulness of their cause and the threat of Western agents , spies and provocateurs . Their colleagues killed on the border were hailed as heroes and schoolchildren in East Berlin were depicted saluting their memorial .

However , West German propaganda leaflets referred to the border as merely " the demarcation line of the Soviet occupation zone " , and emphasised the cruelty and injustice of the division of Germany . Signs along the Western side of the frontier declared " Hier ist Deutschland nicht zu Ende ? Auch drüben ist Vaterland ! " (" Germany does not end here : the Fatherland is over there too ! ")

Whereas the GDR kept its civilians well away from the border , the West Germans actively encouraged tourism , and locations where the border was especially intrusive became tourist attractions . One example was the divided village of Mödlareuth in Bavaria . The Associated Press reported in 1976 that " Western tourists by the busload come out to have their pictures taken against

the backdrop of the latest Communist walled city [and] the concrete blockhouse and the bunker @-@ slits protruding from the green hillock where a collective 's cows were grazing . "

At Zimmerau , in Bavaria , a 38 @-@ metre (125 ft) observation tower (the Bayernurm) was constructed in 1966 to give visitors a view across the hills into East Germany . The inhabitants of the East German village of Kella found themselves becoming a tourist attraction for Westerners in the 1970s and 1980s . A viewing point , the " Window on Kella " , was established on a nearby hilltop from which tourists could peer across the border with binoculars and telescopes . To the amusement of many , a nudist beach was opened on the Western side in 1975 immediately adjoining the border 's terminus near the Baltic Sea port of Travemünde . Visitors often sought to have a nude photograph taken below a looming East German watchtower ; the West Germans noted " a lot more movement on that watchtower since the nudist beach opened . "

= = Fortifications of the inner German border = =

The East German side of the inner German border was dominated by a complex system of fortifications and security zones , over 1 @, @ 300 kilometres (810 mi) long and several kilometres deep . The fortifications were established in 1952 and reached a peak of complexity and lethality at the start of the 1980s . The border guards referred to the side of the border zone facing the GDR as the freundwärts (literally " friendward ") side and that facing the FRG as the feindwärts (" enemyward ") side .

= = = Restricted zone = = =

A person attempting to make an illegal crossing of the inner German border around 1980 , travelling from east to west , would first come to the " restricted zone " (Sperrzone) . This was a 5 kilometres (3 @. @ 1 mi) wide area running parallel to the border to which access was heavily restricted . Its inhabitants could only enter and leave using special permits , were not permitted to enter other villages within the zone , and were subjected to night time curfews . It was not fenced off , but access roads were blocked by checkpoints .

On the far side of the Sperrzone was the signal fence (Signalzaun) , a continuous expanded metal fence 1 @, @ 185 kilometres (736 mi) long and 2 metres (6 @. @ 6 ft) high . The fence was lined with low @-@ voltage electrified strands of barbed wire . When the wire was touched or cut , an alarm was activated to alert nearby guards .

= = = Protective strip = = =

On the other side of the signal fence lay the heavily guarded " protective strip " (Schutzstreifen) , 500 to 1 @, @ 000 metres (1 @, @ 600 to 3 @, @ 300 ft) wide , which adjoined the border itself . It was monitored by guards stationed in concrete , steel and wooden watchtowers constructed at regular intervals along the entire length of the border . Nearly 700 such watchtowers had been built by 1989 ; each of the larger ones was equipped with a powerful 1 @, @ 000 @-@ watt rotating searchlight (Suchscheinwerfer) and firing ports to enable the guards to open fire without having to go outside . Their entrances were always positioned facing towards the East German side , so that observers in the West could not see guards going in or out . Around 1 @, @ 000 two @-@ man observation bunkers also stood along the length of the border .

Guard dogs were used to provide an additional deterrent to escapees . Dog runs (Kettenlaufanlagen) , consisting of a suspended wire up to 100 metres (330 ft) long to which a large dog was chained , were installed on high @-@ risk sectors of the border . The dogs were occasionally turned loose in temporary pens adjoining gates or damaged sections of the fence .

The guards used an all @-@ weather patrol road (Kolonnenweg , literally " column way ") to patrol the border and travel rapidly to the scene of an attempted crossing . It consisted of two parallel lines of perforated concrete blocks that ran beside the border for around 900 kilometres (560 mi) .

Next to the Kolonnenweg was one of the control strips (Kontrollstreifen) , a line of bare earth

running parallel to the fences along almost the entire length of the border . There were two control strips , both located on the inward @-@ facing sides of the fences . The secondary " K2 " strip , 2 metres (6 @. @ 6 ft) wide , ran alongside the signal fence , while the primary " K6 " strip , 6 metres (20 ft) wide , ran along the inside of the fence or wall . In places where the border was vulnerable to escape attempts , the control strip was illuminated at night by high @-@ intensity floodlights (Beleuchtungsanlage) , which were also used at points where rivers and streams crossed the border .

Anyone attempting to cross the control strips would leave footprints , which were quickly detected by patrols . This enabled the guards to identify otherwise undetected escape attempts , recording how many individuals had crossed , where escape attempts were being made and at which times of day escapees were active . From this information , the guards were able to determine where and when patrols needed to be increased , where improved surveillance from watchtowers and bunkers was required , and which areas needed additional fortifications .

Anti @-@ vehicle barriers were installed on the other side of the primary control strip . In some locations , Czech hedgehog barricades , known in German as Panzersperre or Stahligel (" steel hedgehogs ") , were used to prevent vehicles being used to cross the border . Elsewhere , V @-@ shaped anti @-@ vehicle ditches known as Kraftfahrzeug @-@ Sperrgraben (KFZ @-@ Sperrgraben) were installed along 829 kilometres (515 mi) of the border and were absent only where natural obstacles such as streams , rivers , gullies or thick forests made such barriers unnecessary .

= = = Outer fence , walls and minefields = = =

The outer fences were constructed in a number of phases , starting with the initial fortification of the border from May 1952 . The first @-@ generation fence was a crudely constructed single barbed @-@ wire fence (Stacheldrahtzaun) which stood between 1 @. @ 2 and 2 @. @ 5 metres (3 @. @ 9 and 8 @. @ 2 ft) high and was built very close to the actual border line . This was replaced in the late 1950s with parallel rows of more strongly constructed barbed @-@ wire fences , sometimes with concertina wire placed between the fences as an additional obstacle .

A " third @-@ generation " fence , much more solidly constructed , was installed in an ongoing programme of improvements from the late 1960s to the 1980s . The fence line was moved back to create an outer strip between the fence and the actual border . The barbed @-@ wire fences were replaced with a barrier that was usually 3 @. @ 2 ? 4 @. @ 0 metres (10 ? 13 ft) high . It was constructed with expanded metal mesh (Metallgitterzaun) panels . The openings in the mesh were generally too small to provide finger @-@ holds and were very sharp . The panels could not easily be pulled down , as they overlapped , and they could not be cut through with a bolt- or wire @-@ cutter . Nor could they be tunnelled under easily , as the bottom segment of the fences was partially buried in the ground . In a number of places , more lightly constructed fences (Lichtsperrern) consisting of mesh and barbed wire lined the border . The fences were not continuous but could be crossed at a number of places . Gates were installed to enable guards to patrol up to the line and to give engineers access for maintenance on the outward @-@ facing side of the barrier .

In some places , villages adjoining the border were fenced with wooden board fences (Holzlattenzaun) or concrete barrier walls (Betonspermauern) standing around 3 ? 4 metres (9 @. @ 8 ? 13 @. @ 1 ft) high . Windows in buildings adjoining the border were bricked or boarded up , and buildings deemed too close to the border were pulled down . The barrier walls stood along only a small percentage of the border ? 29 @. @ 1 kilometres (18 @. @ 1 mi) of the total length by 1989 .

Anti @-@ personnel mines were installed along approximately half of the border 's length starting in 1966 ; by the 1980s , some 1 @. @ 3 million mines of various Soviet @-@ made types had been laid . In addition , from 1970 the outer fence was booby @-@ trapped with around 60 @, @ 000 SM @-@ 70 (Splittermine @-@ 70) directional anti @-@ personnel mines . They were activated by tripwires connected to the firing mechanism . This detonated a horn @-@ shaped charge filled with shrapnel that was sprayed in one direction along the line of the fence . The device was potentially

lethal to a range of around 120 metres (390 ft) . The mines were eventually removed by the end of 1984 in the face of international condemnation of the East German government .

= = = Border line = = =

Until the late 1960s , the fortifications were constructed almost up to the actual border line . When the third @-@ generation fortifications were constructed , the fences were moved back from between 20 metres (66 ft) to as much as 2 kilometres (1 @.@ 2 mi) . This gave the guards a clear field of fire to target escapees without shots landing in the West and provided a buffer zone where engineers could work on maintaining the outward face of the fence in East German territory . Access to the outer strip was very tightly controlled , to ensure that the guards themselves would not be tempted to escape . Although often described by Western sources as a " no @-@ man 's land " , it was de jure wholly East German territory , and escapees could be arrested or shot . Westerners were prohibited from entering the area and thus could not go to the aid of escapees .

The actual line between West and East Germany was located on the far side of the outer strip . It was marked by granite stones (Grenzsteine) with the letters " DDR " carved on the west @-@ facing edge . Around 2 @,@ 600 distinctive East German concrete " barber pole " (Grenzsäule or Grenzpfähle) markers were installed just behind the border line at intervals of about 500 metres (1 @,@ 600 ft) . A metal coat of arms of East Germany (Staatseblem) was fixed to the side of the marker facing West Germany .

On the West German side , there were no fortifications of any kind , nor even any patrol roads in most areas . Warning signs (Grenzschilder) with messages such as Achtung ! Zonengrenze ! (" Danger ! Zonal border ! ") or Halt ! Hier Zonengrenze (" Stop ! Zonal border here ") notified visitors . Foreign military personnel were restricted from approaching the border to avoid clashes or other unwanted incidents . Signs in English and German provided notifications of the distance to the border to prevent accidental crossings . No such restriction applied to Western civilians , who were free to go up to the border line , and there were no physical obstacles to stop their crossing it .

= = East Germany 's sea border = =

The inner German border system also extended along the Baltic coast , dubbed the " blue border " or sea border of the GDR . The coastline was partly fortified along the east side mouth of the river Trave opposite the West German port of Travemünde . Watchtowers , walls and fences stood along the marshy shoreline to deter escape attempts and the water was patrolled by high @-@ speed East German boats . The continuous line of the inner German border ended at the peninsula of Priwall , still belonging to Travemünde , but already on the east side of the Trave . From there to Boltenhagen , along some 15 km of the eastern shore of the Bay of Mecklenburg , the GDR shoreline was part of the restricted @-@ access " protective strip " or Schutzgebiet . Security controls were imposed on the rest of the coast from Boltenhagen to Altwarp on the Polish border , including the whole of the islands of Poel , Rügen , Hiddensee , Usedom and the peninsulas of Darß and Wustrow .

The GDR implemented a variety of security measures along its Baltic coastline to hinder escape attempts . Camping and access to boats was severely limited and 27 watchtowers were built along the Baltic coastline . If a suspected escape attempt was spotted , high @-@ speed patrol boats would be dispatched to intercept the fugitives . Armed patrols equipped with powerful mobile searchlights monitored the beaches .

Escapees aimed for the western (West German) shore of the Bay of Mecklenburg , a Danish lightship off the port of Gedser , the southern Danish islands of Lolland and Falster , or simply the international shipping lanes in the hope of being picked up by a passing freighter . The Baltic Sea was , however , an extremely dangerous escape route . In all , 189 people are estimated to have died attempting to flee via the Baltic .

Some East Germans tried to escape by jumping overboard from East German ships docked in Baltic harbours . So many East Germans attempted to flee this way in Danish ports that

harbourmasters installed extra life @-@ saving equipment on quaysides where East German vessels docked . The GDR 's government responded by stationing armed Transportpolizei (Trapos) on passenger ships to deal forcefully with escape attempts . On one occasion in August 1961 , the Trapos caused an international incident in the Danish port of Gedser , when they beat up a would @-@ be escapee on the quayside and opened fire , hitting a Danish boat in the harbour . The next day , thousands of Danes turned out to protest against " Vopo (Volkspolizei) methods . " The " boat @-@ jumpers " were eventually stopped by further restricting the already limited travel rights of the GDR 's population .

= = River borders = =

The border also ran along part of the length of three major rivers of central Germany : the Elbe between Lauenburg and Schnackenburg (around 95 kilometres (59 mi)) , the Werra and the Saale . The river borders were especially problematic ; although the Western Allies and West Germany held that the demarcation line ran along the eastern bank , the East Germans and Soviets insisted that it was located in the middle of the river (the Thalweg principle) . In practice , the waterways were shared 50 / 50 but the navigation channels often strayed across the line . This led to tense confrontations as East or West German vessels sought to assert their right to free passage on the waterways .

The rivers were as heavily guarded as other parts of the border . On the Elbe , East Germany maintained a fleet of about 30 fast patrol boats and West Germany had some 16 customs vessels . The river border was closely watched for escapees , many of whom drowned attempting to cross . Numerous bridges blown up in the closing days of the Second World War remained in ruins , while other surviving bridges were blocked or demolished on the East German side . There were no ferry crossings and river barges were rigorously inspected by the GDR border guards . To prevent escape attempts , the East German river banks were barricaded with a continuous line of metal fences and concrete walls . At one location , Rüterberg on the Elbe , the border fortifications completely surrounded the village and sealed off the inhabitants from the rest of East Germany as well as the West .

= = Border guards of the inner German border = =

The guards of the inner German border comprised tens of thousands of military , paramilitary and civilian personnel from both East and West Germany , as well as from the United Kingdom , the United States and initially the Soviet Union .

= = = East Germany = = =

Following the end of the Second World War , the East German side of the border was guarded initially by the Border Troops (Pogranichnyye Voiska) of the Soviet NKVD (later the KGB) . They were supplemented from 1946 by a locally recruited paramilitary force , the German Border Police (Deutsche Grenzpolizei or DGP) , before the Soviets handed over full control of the border to the East Germans in 1955 / 56 . In 1961 , the DGP was converted into a military force within the National People 's Army (Nationale Volksarmee , NVA) . The newly renamed Border Troops of the GDR (Grenztruppen der DDR , commonly nicknamed the Grenzer) came under the NVA 's Border Command or Grenzkommando . They were responsible for securing and defending the borders with West Germany , Czechoslovakia , Poland , the Baltic Sea and West Berlin . At their peak , the Grenztruppen had up to 50 @,@ 000 personnel .

Around half of the Grenztruppen were conscripts , a lower proportion than in other branches of the East German armed forces . Many potential recruits were screened out as potentially unreliable ; for instance , actively religious individuals or those with close relatives in West Germany . They were all subjected to close scrutiny to assure their political reliability and were given intensive ideological indoctrination .

A special unit of the Stasi secret police worked covertly within the Grenztruppen , posing as regular border guards , between 1968 and 1985 , to weed out potential defectors . One in ten officers and one in thirty enlisted men were said to have been recruited by the Stasi as informers . The Stasi regularly interviewed and maintained files on every guard . Stasi operatives were directly responsible for some aspects of security ; passport control stations at crossings were manned by Stasi officers wearing Grenztruppen uniforms .

The Grenztruppen were closely watched to ensure that they could not take advantage of their inside knowledge to escape across the border . Patrols , watchtowers and observation posts were always manned by two or three guards at a time . They were not allowed to go out of each other 's sight in any circumstances . If a guard attempted to escape , his colleagues were under instructions to shoot him without hesitation or prior warning ; 2 @,@ 500 did escape to the West , 5 @,@ 500 more were caught and imprisoned for up to five years , and a number were shot and killed or injured in the attempt .

The work of the guards involved carrying out repair work on the defences , monitoring the zone from watchtowers and bunkers and patrolling the line several times a day . Border Reconnaissance (Grenzaufklärungszug or GAK) soldiers , an elite reconnaissance force , carried out patrols and intelligence @-@ gathering on the western side of the fence . Western visitors to the border were routinely photographed by the GAKs , who also oversaw work detachments maintaining the fence . The workers would be covered by machine guns to discourage them from attempting to escape .

= = = West Germany = = =

A number of West German state organisations were responsible for policing the western side of the border . These included the Bundesgrenzschutz (BGS , Federal Border Protection) , the Bayerische Grenzpolizei (Bavarian Border Police) and the Bundeszollverwaltung (Federal Customs Administration) . West German Army units were not allowed to approach the border without being accompanied by BGS personnel .

The BGS , established in 1951 , was responsible for policing a zone 30 kilometres (19 mi) deep along the border . Its 20 @,@ 000 personnel were equipped with armoured cars , anti @-@ tank guns , helicopters , trucks and jeeps . The BGS had limited police powers within its zone of operations to tackle threats to the peace of the border .

The Bundeszollverwaltung (BZV) was responsible for policing much of the inner German border and manning the West German crossings . Its personnel lived with their families in communities along the border and carried out regular policing tasks in a zone about 10 kilometres (6 @. 2 mi) deep along the border . They had the power to arrest and search suspects in their area of operations with the exception of the section of border in Bavaria . The BZV 's remit overlapped significantly with that of the BGS , which led to a degree of feuding between the two agencies .

The Bayerische Grenzpolizei (BGP) was a border police force raised by the Bavarian government to carry out policing duties along the inner German border 's 390 kilometres (240 mi) in Bavaria . By the late 1960s , the BGP had 600 men patrolling its sector of the border , alongside the BZV , BGS and US Army . Its duties were very similar to those of the BZV , leading to turf wars between the two agencies .

= = = Western Allies = = =

The British Army conducted only relatively infrequent patrols along its sector of the inner German border , principally for training purposes and symbolic value . By the 1970s , it was carrying out only one patrol a month , only rarely using helicopters or ground surveillance radar and erecting no permanent observation posts . The British border zone was divided into two sectors covering a total distance of about 650 kilometres (400 mi) along the border . Unlike the Americans , the British did not assign specific units to border duty , but rotated the task between the divisions of the British Army of the Rhine .

The border was also patrolled in the British sector by the British Frontier Service , the smallest of

the Western border surveillance organisations . Its personnel served as a liaison between British military and political interests and the German agencies on the border . The BFS was disbanded in 1991 following Germany 's reunification .

The United States Army maintained a substantial and continuous military presence at the inner German border throughout the entire period from 1945 to after the end of the Cold War . Regular American soldiers manned the border from the end of the war until they were replaced in 1946 by the United States Constabulary , which was disbanded in 1952 after policing duties were transferred to the German authorities . It was replaced by three dedicated armoured cavalry regiments assigned to provide a permanent defence . The 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment based at Bamberg , 2nd Armored Cavalry Regiment based at Nuremberg and the 14th Armored Cavalry Regiment based at Fulda ? later replaced by the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment ? monitored the border using observation posts , ground and air patrols , countering intrusions and gathering intelligence on Warsaw Pact activities .

= = = Cross @-@ border contacts = = =

There was little informal contact between the two sides ; East German guards were under orders not to speak to Westerners . After the initiation of détente between East and West Germany in the 1970s , the two sides established procedures for maintaining formal contacts through 14 direct telephone connections or Grenzinformationenpunkte (GIP , " border information points ") . They were used to resolve local problems affecting the border , such as floods , forest fires or stray animals .

For many years , the two sides waged a propaganda battle across the border using propaganda signs and canisters of leaflets fired or dropped into each other 's territory . West German leaflets sought to undermine the willingness of East German guards to shoot at refugees attempting to cross the border , while East German leaflets promoted the GDR 's view of West Germany as a militaristic regime intent on restoring Germany 's 1937 borders .

During the 1950s , West Germany sent millions of propaganda leaflets into East Germany each year . In 1968 alone , over 4 @,@ 000 projectiles containing some 450 @,@ 000 leaflets were fired from East Germany into the West . Another 600 waterproof East German leaflet containers were recovered from cross @-@ border rivers . The " leaflet war " was eventually ended by mutual agreement in the early 1970s as part of the normalisation of relations between the two German states .

= = Crossing the inner German border = =

The inner German border was never entirely sealed in the fashion of the border between the two Koreas and could be crossed in either direction throughout the Cold War . The post @-@ war agreements on the governance of Berlin specified that the Western Allies were to have access to the city via defined air , road , rail and river corridors . This was mostly respected by the Soviets and East Germans , albeit with periodic interruptions and harassment of travellers . Even during the Berlin Blockade of 1948 , supplies could be brought in by air ? the famous Berlin Airlift . Before and after the blockade , Western civilian and military trains , road traffic and barges routinely passed through East Germany en route to Berlin .

The border could be crossed legally only through a limited number of air , road , rail and river routes . Foreigners were able to cross East German territory to or from West Berlin , Denmark , Sweden , Poland and Czechoslovakia . However , they had only limited and very tightly controlled access to the rest of East Germany and faced numerous restrictions on travel , accommodation and expenditure . Lengthy inspections caused long delays to traffic at the crossing points . Westerners found crossing the inner German border to be a somewhat disturbing experience ; Jan Morris wrote :

Travelling from west to east through [the inner German border] was like entering a drab and disturbing dream , peopled by all the ogres of totalitarianism , a half @-@ lit world of shabby

resentments , where anything could be done to you , I used to feel , without anybody ever hearing of it , and your every step was dogged by watchful eyes and mechanisms .

= = = Crossing points = = =

Before 1952 , the inner German border could be crossed at almost any point along its length . The fortification of the border resulted in the severing of 32 railway lines , three autobahns , 31 main roads , eight primary roads , about 60 secondary roads and thousands of lanes and cart tracks . The number of crossing points was reduced to three air corridors , three road corridors , two railway lines and two river connections giving transit access to Berlin , plus a handful of additional crossing points for freight traffic .

The situation improved somewhat after the initiation of détente in the 1970s . Additional crossings for so @-@ called kleine Grenzverkehr ? " small border traffic " , essentially meaning West German day trippers ? were opened at various locations along the border . By 1982 , there were 19 border crossings : six roads , three autobahns , eight railway lines plus the Elbe river and the Mittellandkanal .

The largest was at Helmstedt @-@ Marienborn on the Hanover ? Berlin autobahn (A 2) , through which 34 @.@ 6 million travellers passed between 1985 ? 89 . Codenamed Checkpoint Alpha , this was the first of three Allied checkpoints on the road to Berlin . The others were Checkpoint Bravo , where the autobahn crossed from East Germany into West Berlin , and most famous of all , Checkpoint Charlie , the only place where non @-@ Germans could cross from West to East Berlin .

It was not possible to simply drive through the gap in the fence that existed at crossing points , as the East Germans installed high @-@ impact vehicle barriers and mobile rolling barriers that could (and did) kill drivers that attempted to ram them . Vehicles were subjected to rigorous checks to uncover fugitives . Inspection pits and mirrors allowed the undersides of vehicles to be scrutinised . Probes were used to investigate the chassis and even the fuel tank , where a fugitive might be concealed , and vehicles could be partially dismantled in on @-@ site garages . At Marienborn there was even a mortuary garage where coffins could be checked to confirm that the occupants really were dead . Passengers were checked and often interrogated about their travel plans and reasons for travelling . The system used simple technology and was slow , relying largely on vast card indexes recording travellers ' details , but it was effective nonetheless ; during the 28 years of operation of the Marienborn complex , no successful escapes were recorded .

= = = Border crossing regulations = = =

West Germans were able to cross the border relatively freely to visit relatives , but had to go through numerous bureaucratic formalities . East Germans were subjected to far stricter restrictions . It was not until November 1964 that they were allowed to visit the West at all , and even then only pensioners were allowed . This gave rise to a joke that only in East Germany did people look forward to old age . Younger East Germans were not allowed to travel to the West until 1972 , though few did so until the mid @-@ 1980s . They had to apply for an exit visa and passport , pay a substantial fee , obtain permission from their employer and undergo an interrogation from the police .

The odds were against successful applications , and only approximately 40 @,@ 000 a year were approved . Refusal was often arbitrary , dependent on the goodwill of local officials . Members of the Party elite and cultural ambassadors were frequently given permission to travel , as were essential transport workers . However , they were not permitted to take their families with them .

Until the late 1980s , ordinary East Germans were only permitted to travel to the West on " urgent family business " , such as the marriage , serious illness or death of a close relative . In February 1986 , the regime relaxed the definition of " urgent family business " , which prompted a massive increase in the number of East German citizens able to travel to the West . The relaxation of the restrictions was reported to have been motivated by a desire on the part of the East German

leadership to reduce their citizens ' desire to travel and shrink the number applying to emigrate . In practice , however , it had exactly the opposite effect .

= = = Emigrating from East Germany = = =

There was no formal legal basis under which a citizen could emigrate from East Germany . In 1975 , however , East Germany signed up to the Helsinki Accords , a pan @-@ European treaty to improve relations between the countries of Europe . An increasing number of East German citizens sought to use the Accords ' provision on freedom of movement to secure exit visas . By the late 1980s , over 100 @,@ 000 applications for visas were being submitted annually with around 15 @,@ 000 ? 25 @,@ 000 being granted .

The GDR 's government nonetheless remained opposed to emigration and sought to dissuade would @-@ be émigrés . The process of applying for an exit permit was deliberately made slow , demeaning , frustrating and often fruitless . Applicants were marginalised , demoted or sacked from their jobs , excluded from universities and subjected to ostracism . They faced the threat of having their children taken into state custody on the grounds that they were unfit to bring up children . The law was used to punish those who continued to apply for emigration ; over 10 @,@ 000 applicants were arrested by the Stasi between the 1970s and 1989 .

A report for the Central Committee 's security section noted : " The emigration problem is confronting us with a fundamental problem of the GDR 's development . Experience shows that the current repertoire of solutions (improved travel possibilities , expatriation of applicants , etc .) have not brought the desired results , but rather the opposite . " The agitation for emigration , the report concluded , " threatens to undermine beliefs in the correctness of the Party 's policies . "

= = = Ransoms and " humanitarian releases " = = =

East German citizens could also emigrate through the semi @-@ secret route of being ransomed by the West German government in a process termed Freikauf (literally the buying of freedom) . Between 1964 and 1989 , 33 @,@ 755 political prisoners were ransomed . A further 2 @,@ 087 prisoners were released to the West under an amnesty in 1972 . Another 215 @,@ 000 people , including 2 @,@ 000 children cut off from their parents , were allowed to leave East Germany to rejoin their families . In exchange , West Germany paid over 3 @.@ 4 billion DM ? nearly \$ 2 @.@ 3 billion at 1990 prices ? in goods and hard currency .

Those ransomed were valued on a sliding scale , ranging from around 1 @,@ 875 DM for a manual worker to around 11 @,@ 250 DM for a doctor . The justification , according to East Germany , was that this was compensation for the money invested by the state in the prisoner 's training . For a while , payments were made in kind using goods that were in short supply in East Germany , such as oranges , bananas , coffee and medical drugs . The average prisoner was worth around 4 @,@ 000 DM worth of goods .

The scheme was highly controversial in the West . Freikauf was denounced by many as human trafficking , but was defended by others as an " act of pure humanitarianism " ; the West German government budgeted money for Freikauf under the euphemistic heading of " support of special aid measures of an all @-@ German character . "

= = Escape attempts and victims of the inner German border = =

= = = Refugee flows and escape attempts = = =

Between 1950 and 1988 , around 4 million East Germans migrated to the West ; 3 @.@ 454 million left between 1950 and the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961 . After the border was fortified and the Berlin Wall constructed , the number of illegal crossings fell dramatically and continued to fall as the defences were improved over the subsequent decades . However , escapees were never more

than a small minority of the total number of emigrants from East Germany . During the 1980s , only about 1 % of those who left East Germany did so by escaping across the border . Far more people left the country after being granted official permits , by fleeing through third countries or by being ransomed by the West German government .

The vast majority of refugees were motivated by economic concerns and sought to improve their living conditions and opportunities by migrating to the West . Events such as the crushing of the 1953 uprising , the imposition of collectivisation and East Germany 's final economic crisis in the late 1980s prompted surges in the number of escape attempts .

Attempts to flee across the border were carefully studied and recorded by the GDR authorities to identify possible weak points . These were addressed by strengthening the fortifications in vulnerable areas . At the end of the 1970s , a study was carried out by the East German army to review attempted " border breaches " (Grenzdurchbrüche) . It found that 4 @, @ 956 people had attempted to escape across the border between 1 December 1974 and 30 November 1979 . Of those , 3 @, @ 984 people (80 @. @ 4 %) were arrested by the Volkspolizei in the Sperrzone , the outer restricted zone . 205 people (4 @. @ 1 %) were caught at the signal fence .

Within the inner security zone , the Schutzstreifen , a further 743 people (15 %) were arrested by the guards . 48 people (1 %) were stopped ? i.e. killed or injured ? by landmines and 43 people (0 @. @ 9 %) by SM @- @ 70 directional mines on the fence . A further 67 people (1 @. @ 35 %) were intercepted at the fence (shot and / or arrested) . A total of 229 people ? just 4 @. @ 6 % of attempted escapees , representing less than one in twenty ? made it across the fence . Of these , the largest number (129 , or 55 % of successful escapees) succeeded in making it across the fence in unmined sectors . 89 people (39 % of escapees) managed to cross both the minefields and the fence , but just 12 people (6 % of the total) succeeded in getting past the SM @- @ 70s booby @- @ trap mines on the fences .

Escape attempts were severely punished by the GDR . From 1953 , the regime described the act of escaping as Republikflucht (literally " flight from the Republic ") , by analogy with the existing military term Fahnenflucht (" desertion ") . A successful escapee was not a Flüchtling (" refugee ") but a Republikflüchtiger (" Republic deserter ") . Those who attempted to escape were called Sperrbrecher (literally " blockade runners " but more loosely translated as " border violators ") . Those who helped escapees were not Fluchthelfer (" escape helpers ") , the Western term , but Menschenhändler (" human traffickers ") . Such ideologically coloured language enabled the regime to portray border crossers as little better than traitors and criminals .

Republikflucht became a crime in 1957 , punishable by heavy fines and up to three years ' imprisonment . Any act associated with an escape attempt ? including helping an escapee ? was subject to this legislation . Those caught in the act were often tried for espionage as well and given proportionately harsher sentences . More than 75 @, @ 000 people ? an average of more than seven people a day ? were imprisoned for attempting to escape across the border , serving an average of one to two years ' imprisonment . Border guards who attempted to escape were treated much more harshly and were on average imprisoned for five years .

= = = Escape methods = = =

Escapees used a variety of methods . The great majority crossed on foot , though some took more unusual routes . One of the most spectacular was the escape in September 1979 of eight people from two families in a home @- @ made hot @- @ air balloon . Their flight involved an ascent to more than 2 @, @ 500 metres (8 @, @ 200 ft) before landing near the West German town of Naila . The incident inspired the film Night Crossing .

Other escapees relied more on physical strength and endurance . An escapee in 1987 used meat hooks to scale the fences , while in 1971 a doctor swam 45 kilometres (28 mi) across the Baltic Sea from Rostock almost to the Danish island of Lolland , before he was picked up by a West German yacht . Another escapee used an air mattress to escape across the Baltic in 1987 .

Mass escapes were rare . One of the few that succeeded took place on 2 October 1961 , when 53 people from the border village of Böseckendorf ? a quarter of the village 's population ? escaped en

masse , followed by another 13 inhabitants in February 1963 . An unusual mass escape occurred in September 1964 when 14 East Germans , including 11 children , were smuggled across the border in a refrigerated truck . They were able to escape detection by being concealed under the carcasses of slaughtered pigs being transported to the West .

The traffic was not one @-@ way ; thousands of people migrated each year from West Germany to the east , motivated by reasons such as marital problems , family estrangement and homesickness . A number of Allied military personnel , including British , French , German and American troops , also defected . By the end of the Cold War , as many as 300 United States citizens were thought to have defected across the Iron Curtain for a variety of reasons ? whether to escape criminal charges , for political reasons or because (as the St. Petersburg Times put it) " girl @-@ hungry GI 's [were tempted] with seductive sirens , who usually desert the love @-@ lorn soldier once he is across the border . " The fate of such defectors varied considerably . Some were sent straight to labour camps on charges of espionage . Others committed suicide , while a few were able to find wives and work on the eastern side of the border .

= = = Order to fire = = =

From 1945 onwards , unauthorised crossers of the inner German border risked being shot by Soviet or East German guards . The use of deadly force was termed the Schießbefehl (" order to fire " or " command to shoot ") . It was formally in force as early as 1948 , when regulations concerning the use of firearms on the border were promulgated . A regulation issued to East German police on 27 May 1952 stipulated that " failure to obey the orders of the Border Patrol will be met by the use of arms . " From the 1960s through to the end of the 1980s , the border guards were given daily verbal orders (Vergatterung) to " track down , arrest or annihilate violators . " The GDR formally codified its regulations on the use of deadly force in March 1982 , when the State Border Law mandated that firearms were to be used as the " maximum measure in the use of force " against individuals who " publicly attempt to break through the state border " .

The GDR 's leadership explicitly endorsed the use of deadly force . General Heinz Hoffmann , the GDR defence minister , declared in August 1966 that " anyone who does not respect our border will feel the bullet . " In 1974 , Erich Honecker , as Chairman of the GDR 's National Defence Council , ordered : " Firearms are to be ruthlessly used in the event of attempts to break through the border , and the comrades who have successfully used their firearms are to be commended . "

The Schießbefehl was , not surprisingly , very controversial in the West and was singled out for criticism by the West Germans . The GDR authorities occasionally suspended the Schießbefehl on occasions when it would have been politically inconvenient to have to explain dead refugees , such as during a visit to the GDR by the French foreign minister in 1985 . It was also a problem for many of the East German guards and was the motivating factor behind a number of escapes , when guards facing a crisis of conscience defected because of their unwillingness to shoot fellow citizens .

= = = Deaths on the border = = =

It is still not certain how many people died on the inner German border or who they all were , as the GDR treated such information as a closely guarded secret . But estimates have risen steadily since unification , as evidence has been gathered from East German records . As of 2009 , unofficial estimates are up to 1 @, @ 100 people , though officially released figures give a count from 270 up to 421 deaths .

There were many ways to die on the inner German border . Numerous escapees were shot by the border guards , while others were killed by mines and booby @-@ traps . A substantial number drowned while trying to cross the Baltic and the Elbe river . Not all of those killed on the border were attempting to escape . On 13 October 1961 , Westfälische Rundschau journalist Kurt Lichtenstein was shot on the border near the village of Zicherie after he attempted to speak with East German farm workers . His death aroused condemnation across the political spectrum in West Germany .

The incident prompted students from Braunschweig to erect a sign on the border protesting the killing .

An Italian truck driver and member of the Italian Communist Party , Benito Corghi , was shot at a crossing point in August 1976 ; the GDR government was severely embarrassed and , unusually , offered an apology . In one notorious shooting on 1 May 1976 , a former East German political prisoner , Michael Gartenschläger , who had fled to the West some years before , was ambushed and killed by a Stasi commando squad on the border near Büchen . The Stasi reported that he had been " liquidated by security forces of the GDR " .

Twenty @-@ five East German border guards died after being shot from the Western side of the border or were killed by resisting escapees or (often accidentally) by their own colleagues . The East German government described them as " victims of armed assaults and imperialist provocations against the state border of the GDR " and alleged that " bandits " in the West took potshots at guards doing their duty ? a version of events that was uncorroborated by Western accounts of border incidents .

The two sides commemorated their dead in very different ways . Various mostly unofficial memorials were set up on the western side by people seeking to commemorate victims of the border . West Germans such as Michael Gartenschläger and Kurt Lichtenstein were commemorated with signs and memorials , some of which were supported by the government . The death of East German Heinz @-@ Josef Große in 1982 was commemorated annually by demonstrations on the Western side of the border . After the policy of détente was initiated in the 1970s , this became politically inconvenient and state support for border memorials largely ceased .

The taboo in East Germany surrounding escapees meant that the great majority of deaths went unpublicised and uncommemorated . However , the deaths of border guards were used for GDR propaganda , which portrayed them as " martyrs " . Four stone memorials were erected in East Berlin to mark their deaths . The regime named schools , barracks and other public facilities after the dead guards and used their memorials as places of pilgrimage to signify that (as a slogan put it) " their deaths are our commitment " to maintaining the border . After 1989 the memorials were vandalised , neglected and ultimately removed .

= = Fall of the inner German border = =

The fall of the inner German border came rapidly and unexpectedly in November 1989 , along with the fall of the Berlin Wall . Its integrity had been fatally compromised in May 1989 when a reformist Communist government in Hungary , supported by the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev , began to dismantle its border fortifications . Hungary was already a popular tourist destination for East Germans . Its government was still notionally Communist but planned free elections and economic reform as part of a strategy of " rejoining Europe " and reforming its struggling economy .

Opening the Hungarian border with Austria was essential to this effort ; West Germany had secretly offered a much @-@ needed hard currency loan of DM 500 million (\$ 250 million) in return for allowing citizens of the GDR to freely emigrate . Pictures of the barbed @-@ wire fences being taken down were transmitted into East Germany by West German television stations .

They prompted a mass exodus by hundreds of thousands of East Germans , which began in earnest in September 1989 . In addition to those crossing the Hungarian border , tens of thousands of East Germans scaled the walls of the West German embassies in Prague , Warsaw and Budapest , where they were regarded as " German citizens " by the federal government , claiming " asylum " .

Czechoslovakia 's hardline communist government agreed to close its border with East Germany to choke off the exodus . The closure produced uproar across East Germany and the GDR government 's bid to humiliate refugees by expelling them from the country in sealed trains backfired disastrously . Torn @-@ up identity papers and East German passports littered the tracks as the refugees threw them out of the windows . When the trains passed through Dresden , 1 @,@ 500 East Germans stormed the main railway station in an attempt to board . Dozens were injured and the station concourse was virtually destroyed .

The small pro @-@ democracy Monday demonstrations soon swelled into crowds of hundreds of thousands of people in cities across East Germany . The East German leadership considered using force but ultimately backed down , lacking support from the Soviet Union for a violent Tiananmen Square @-@ style military intervention . Reformist members of the East German Politbüro sought to rescue the situation by forcing the resignation of the hardline Party chairman Erich Honecker , replacing him in October 1989 with the marginally less hardline Egon Krenz .

The new government sought to appease the protesters by reopening the border with Czechoslovakia . This , however , merely resulted in the resumption of the mass exodus through Hungary via Czechoslovakia . On 8 November 1989 , with huge demonstrations continuing across the country , the entire Politbüro resigned and a new , more moderate Politbüro was appointed under Krenz 's continued leadership .

= = = Opening of the border and the fall of the GDR = = =

The East German government sought to defuse the situation by relaxing the country 's border controls with effect from 10 November 1989 ; the announcement was made on the evening of 9 November 1989 by Politbüro member Günter Schabowski at a somewhat chaotic press conference in East Berlin , who proclaimed the new control regime as liberating the people from a situation of psychological pressure by legalising and simplifying migration . Misunderstanding the note passed to him about the decision to open the border , he announced the border would be opened " immediately , without delay " , rather than from the following day as the government had intended . Crucially , it was neither meant to be an uncontrolled opening nor to apply to East Germans wishing to visit the West as tourists . At an interview in English after the press conference , Schabowski told the NBC reporter Tom Brokaw that " it is no question of tourism . It is a permission of leaving the GDR [permanently] . "

As the press conference had been broadcast live , within hours , thousands of people gathered at the Berlin Wall demanding that the guards open the gates . The border guards were unable to contact their superiors for instructions and , fearing a stampede , opened the gates . The iconic scenes that followed ? people pouring into West Berlin , standing on the Wall and attacking it with pickaxes ? were broadcast worldwide .

While the eyes of the world were on the Mauerfall (the fall of the Wall) in Berlin , a simultaneous process of Grenzöffnung (border opening) was taking place along the entire length of the inner German border . Existing crossings were opened immediately . Within the first four days , 4 @.@ 3 million East Germans ? a quarter of the country 's entire population ? poured into West Germany . At the Helmstedt crossing point on the Berlin ? Hanover autobahn , cars were backed up for 65 km (40 mi) ; some drivers waited 11 hours to cross to the West . The border was opened in stages over the next few months . Many new crossing points were created , reconnecting communities that had been separated for nearly 40 years . BBC correspondent Ben Bradshaw described the jubilant scenes at the railway station of Hof in Bavaria in the early hours of 12 November :

It was not just the arrivals at Hof who wore their emotions on their sleeves . The local people turned out in their hundreds to welcome them ; stout men and women in their Sunday best , twice or three times the average age of those getting off the trains , wept as they clapped . ' These are our people , free at last , ' they said ... Those arriving at Hof report people lining the route of the trains in East Germany waving and clapping and holding placards saying : ' We 're coming soon.'

Even the East German border guards were not immune to the euphoria . One of them , Peter Zahn , described how he and his colleagues reacted to the opening of the border :

After the Wall fell , we were in a state of delirium . We submitted a request for our reserve activities to be ended , which was approved a few days later . We visited Helmstedt and Braunschweig in West Germany , which would have been impossible before . In the NVA even listening to Western radio stations was punishable and there we were on an outing in the West .

To the surprise of many West Germans , many of the East German visitors spent their DM 100 " welcome money " buying great quantities of bananas , a highly prized rarity in the East . For months after the opening of the border , bananas were sold out at supermarkets along the western side of

the border as East Germans bought up whole crates , believing supplies would soon be exhausted . The rush for fruit made the banana the unofficial symbol of the changes in East Germany , which some dubbed the " banana revolution " .

Some West German leftists protested at what they saw as rampant consumerism by tossing bananas at East Germans coming to visit the West . The easterners ' obsession with bananas was famously spoofed by the West German satirical magazine Titanic on the front cover of its November 1989 edition , which depicted " Easterner Gaby (17) , happy to be in West Germany : My first banana " . Gaby was shown holding a large peeled cucumber .

The opening of the border had a profound political and psychological effect on the East German public . For many people , the very existence of the GDR , which the SED had justified as the first " Socialist state on German soil " , came to be seen as pointless . The state was bankrupt , the economy was collapsing , the political class was discredited , the governing institutions were in chaos and the people were demoralised by the evaporation of the collective assumptions that had underpinned their society for 40 years . Membership of the Party collapsed and Krenz himself resigned on 6 December 1989 after only 50 days in office , handing over to the moderate Hans Modrow . The removal of restrictions on travel prompted hundreds of thousands of East Germans to migrate to the West ? more than 116 @,@ 000 did so between 9 November and 31 December 1989 , compared with 40 @,@ 000 for the whole of the previous year .

The new East German leadership initiated " round table " talks with opposition groups , similar to the processes that had led to multi @-@ party elections in Hungary and Poland . When the first free elections were held in East Germany in March 1990 , the former SED , which had renamed itself as the Party of Democratic Socialism , was swept from power and replaced by a pro @-@ reunification Alliance for Germany coalition led by the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) , Chancellor Kohl 's party . Both countries progressed rapidly towards reunification , while international diplomacy paved the way abroad . In July 1990 , monetary union was achieved . A Treaty on the establishment of a unified Germany was agreed on in August 1990 and political reunification took place on 3 October 1990 .

= = = Abandonment of the border = = =

The border fortifications were progressively torn down and eventually abandoned in the months following its opening . Dozens of new crossings were opened by February 1990 , and the guards no longer carried weapons nor made much effort to check travellers ' passports . The guards ' numbers were rapidly reduced ; half were dismissed within five months of the opening . On 1 July 1990 the border was abandoned and the Grenztruppen were officially abolished ; all but 2 @,@ 000 of them were dismissed or transferred to other jobs .

The Bundeswehr gave the remaining border guards and other ex @-@ NVA soldiers the task of clearing the fortifications , which was completed only in 1994 . The scale of the task was immense , involving both the clearing of the fortifications and the rebuilding of hundreds of roads and railway lines . A serious complication was the presence of mines along the border . Although the 1 @.@ 4 million mines laid by the GDR were supposed to have been removed during the 1980s , it turned out that 34 @,@ 000 were unaccounted for . A further 1 @,@ 100 mines were found and removed following reunification at a cost of more than DM 250 million , in a programme that was not concluded until the end of 1995 .

The border clearers ' task was aided unofficially by German civilians from both sides of the former border , who scavenged the installations for fencing , wire and blocks of concrete to use in home improvements . Much of the fence was sold to a West German scrap @-@ metal company . Environmental groups undertook a programme of re @-@ greening the border , planting new trees and sowing grass seeds to fill in the clear @-@ cut area along the line .

= = Border area today = =

Very little remains of the installations along the former inner German border . At least 30 public ,

private and municipal museums along the old line present displays of equipment and other artifacts relating to the border . Among the preserved sites are several dozen watchtowers , short stretches of the fence and associated installations (some of which have been reconstructed) , sections of the wall still in situ at Hötensleben and Mödlareuth , and a number of buildings related to the border , such as the GDR crossing point at Marienborn .

Substantial sections of the Kolonnenweg remain in place to serve as farm and forestry access roads , though the accompanying anti @-@ vehicles ditches , fences and other obstacles have been almost entirely removed . Artworks , commemorative stones , memorials and signs have been erected at many points along the former border to mark its opening , to remember its victims and to record the division and reunification of Germany .

The closure of the border region for nearly 40 years created a haven for wildlife in some places . Although parts of the East German side of the border were farmed , intensive farming of the kind practised elsewhere in Germany was absent and large areas were untouched by agriculture . Conservationists became aware as early as the 1970s that the border had become a refuge for rare species of animals and plants . Their findings led the Bavarian government to begin a programme of buying land along the border to ensure its protection from development .

In December 1989 , only a month after the opening of the border , conservationists from East and West Germany met to work out a plan to establish a " German Green Belt " (Grünes Band Deutschland) stretching from the Baltic Sea to the Czech border . The Bundestag voted unanimously in December 2004 to extend federal protection to the Green Belt and incorporate it into a " European Green Belt " being developed along the entire 6 @,@ 800 @-@ kilometre (4 @,@ 200 mi) length of the former Iron Curtain . The German Green Belt now links 160 natural parks , 150 flora @-@ and @-@ fauna areas , three UNESCO biosphere reservations and the Harz Mountains National Park . It is home to a wide variety of species that are rare elsewhere in Germany , including the wild cat , black stork , otter and rare mosses and orchids . Most of Germany 's red kites ? more than half of the 25 @,@ 000 that live in Europe ? live along the former border . The Bund Naturschutz , one of Germany 's largest conservation groups , is campaigning to extend the area within the Green Belt designated as nature conservation zones .