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In the Shadows of a Fallen Wall

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In the Shadows of a Fallen Wall

SANFORD TWEEDIE

University of Nebraska Press Lincoln & London

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Parts of this book originally appeared elsewhere. In chapter 1, the op-ed piece appeared as “Echoes of America: German School Siege Reflects U.S. Influence” in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* on April 30, 2002 (A13). Chapter 4, “Concrete Details,” appeared in a slightly different form as “Erfurt: Your Guide’s Tour” in *Exquisite Corpse* 10 (Fall 2001). Two pieces of flash fiction in Chapter 9, “The Class That Doesn’t Exist in the Country That Once Did,” appeared elsewhere: “American, the Beautiful” in *Doorknobs and BodyPaint* 49 (February 2008) and “The New Economy” under the title “Stimulus Package” in *Word Riot* (June 2009). Chapter 10, “Whatever You Do, Don’t Look Down,” originally appeared in slightly different form in *The Funnel, the Newsmagazine of the German-American Fulbright Commission* 37 no. 2 (Fall 2001). And in Chapter 11, “In Former Times,” the excerpt by Roberta Harvey appeared in *The Funnel, the Newsmagazine of the German-American Fulbright Commission* 37 no. 1 (Spring 2001).

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Set in Lyon Text by Laura Wellington.

For Callan, Tara, and Roberta,
for whom I would climb any wall

And for Manuela and Wilfried,
Thomas and Evy, and all their
children, who shared their lives
with us

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The past is never quite past.

—TIMOTHY GARTON ASH

Nothing ever really disappears.

—LUTZ RATHENOW

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As with any book, an author's name appears on the front, but the words within are created with the help and guidance of many others.

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In Erfurt, so many clerks, cashiers, *Strassenbahn* operators, wait staff, and others made up the majority of our daily encounters and formed our positive attitudes about people living in the city and the former East Germany. But I would especially like to recognize the kindness shown by the staffs of Albert-Schweitzer-Gymnasium and Haus der Bunte Träume (House of Colorful Dreams) Kindergarten, who welcomed and supported our children in ways we could not have imagined.

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I shall admit my own weakness, at any rate; for I never bring
back home the same character that I took abroad with me.

—LUCIUS ANNAEUS SENECA

Introduction

The Walls in Our Heads

On the morning of April 26, 2002, my then five-year-old daughter and I walked out the back door of our home, loaded down with her supplies for kindergarten and mine for work. We made our way to the car parked in the driveway of our home in a small southern New Jersey town. After strapping Callan into her seat, I started the engine and turned on NPR as we waited for Roberta, my wife and Callan’s mom, to catch up. It was 8:00 a.m.

In his resonant voice and distinctive intonation, Carl Kasell led off the program: “Reports out of Germany say a school shooting has left two dead.” I knew—not suspected, knew in a desperate desire not to—that when he went on to identify the location, it would be Erfurt, the city we had moved from only eight months prior. Kasell continued: “Police in Erfurt say that a gunman entered the Gutenberg Gymnasium shortly after eleven a.m. German time and began . . .” 11:00 a.m. in Germany; 5:00 a.m. our time. Three hours ago. That almost-morning hour when most everyone is asleep. I had been far into my night’s slumber. Had I stirred? Rolled over? Possibly.

As Kasell narrated the still-sketchy details about the shooting—the fatality count would eventually rise to six-

teen—I began to better understand what it meant to have lived in the former German Democratic Republic for nearly a year and the impact our time on the other side of the now-drawn-back Iron Curtain had on our lives. My immediate reactions were captured in a piece I wrote that morning for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* op-ed page:

When I heard the news about the shooting at Gutenberg School in Erfurt, Germany, my first concern was for our German friend’s daughter who goes to high school in the city. My second thought was that it is now clear how much America’s influence has pervaded the once-communist and Soviet-controlled German Democratic Republic.

My first fear was soon alleviated. As soon as I reached work, I e-mailed my friend in Erfurt. She replied right away, assuring me that the incident had not taken place at her daughter’s school and that her daughter was home safely.

But my second fear did not disappear so quickly. Nor do I think it ever will. My family spent the 2000–2001 academic year living in Erfurt while I taught at the University, whose most famous student was Martin Luther. Erfurt is a beautiful, medieval town of two hundred thousand that was spared almost completely from World War II bombing. Resplendent with small community gardens and home to an international gardening center, Erfurt is known as the “garden city.”

My daughter Tara, who was then thirteen, attended one of the city’s nine Gymnasiums, combination middle and high schools for the college bound. She loved it. The students were kind, caring, and non-cliquish. They embraced Tara as a friend, despite her barely being able to speak German when she arrived. Best of all, they were noncompetitive, enjoying one another’s company. Such attitudes, we would come to learn, reflected those of the larger society. Far from the ste-

reotype of gruff, no-nonsense Germans, we found eastern Germans to be friendly, easy-going and fun-loving people.

Yet, the town and the area—indeed all of the former East Germany—are in transition from a communist to a free market society. This is represented by stark contrasts. For example, in the middle of our neighborhood of Soviet-designed, concrete apartment buildings, capable of housing some forty thousand people, squatted a recently built mall that looked for all the world like any mall found in the United States. Big Mercedes share the road with the remaining East German-era Trabants—small, fiberglass cars powered by little more than a lawnmower engine.

And though only a handful of Americans live in the town, America's influence is undeniable. Erfurt is home to McDonald's, Burger King, Pizza Hut, Woolworth's and Ford dealerships. Even in German stores, American logos are popular. American music fills the airwaves.

The contrasts are found in more than just the buildings and products; they are also found in the people—those who recall what eastern Germans refer to as “former times” and those who are too young to remember life under communism. Indeed, my university students, who tended to range in age from about twenty to twenty-three years, are the last of the generation who have any memory of living in the GDR. Their younger siblings were unable to recall the fall of the Berlin Wall.

I gave several talks on American youth culture to school teachers during my stay. To introduce the topic, I would ask two questions. The first was, “How much are teens here like teens in America?” The follow-up question was, “And how much do you want them to be like teens in America?”

Let me offer a story in response. While living in Erfurt, we awoke one morning to find that our car had been stolen.

It was recovered by police a few hours later. Riding with the police to the local garage where the car had been towed, I asked one of the officers whom he thought had committed the crime. “Dumme Jungs,” he responded. Stupid boys. He then went on to say that the problem with kids today was a lack of leadership. What he meant was that since the fall of the Wall, there was no one keeping an eye on the kids; that the structured and busy lives forced upon people by the East German government were replaced by nothing; that kids had too much time to hang out, see what they didn’t have and imagine the criminal means to get it. Clearly, he was lamenting that cradle-to-grave care and oversight provided by the GDR had disappeared, that “former times” were over.

Robert Steinhäuser, the nineteen-year-old gunman in Friday’s shootings, proved that they are. He reportedly told a classmate, “One day, I want everyone to know my name and I want to be famous.” He got his wish. He now becomes the poster child for the new eastern German, one whose memory does not include a time when the “e” in “east” was capitalized, one who has grown up with the conflicting tenets of Western values. More significantly, Steinhäuser’s legacy results from his adoption of methods for coping with the system’s pressures that we in the West are far too familiar with.

Dumme Jungs.

When an editor of the op-ed page tried to contact me to say he planned to run the piece, I was on my way home from work and, in my pre-cell phone days, missed his call. I didn’t notice until later than evening his message on the home answering machine saying that I could see the proofs. By then I figured it was too late to do anything for the morning paper.

Even if I were given the chance to consider the editor’s changes, I am not sure I would have argued too strongly

against them. I don't think I would have said, "It's my way or don't publish it, Mr. Editor." While his changes and excisions tightened the piece without altering its tenor, in a move that I felt made the piece more inflammatory, he changed the beginning and ending. The published opening removed the first two paragraphs above and thrust to the front information I had included for my byline: "As a Fulbright scholar during the 2000–2001 school year, I lived in Erfurt, the eastern German city where 16 people were slain inside Gutenberg school Friday. When I heard the news, one of my first thoughts was that it is now clear how much America's influence has pervaded the once-communist former German Democratic Republic."

This not only removed my genuine concern for those whom I feared might have been harmed in the shooting, it also made me seem as if I were flouting my credentials. I had put them in the byline to explain why I had been in eastern Germany,¹ not to wave the award in the reader's face. The editor also altered the closing by cutting out the *Dumme Jungs* as the last sentence, thus removing my final condemnation of Steinhäuser, the young shooter who turned the gun on himself after being confronted by a teacher during his spree. Even the change in title from my "School Shooting Shows That East Germany Has Now Joined the West" to "Echoes of America: German School Siege Reflects U.S. Influence" shifted the agency of the relationship.

Still, when I saw the piece as it was published along with my e-mail address in the byline, I didn't anticipate the wrath that would follow. The morning of publication, I arrived at

1. Following the precedent set in the op-ed piece, I use the lowercase "e" in "east" and "eastern" to refer to the land formerly known as East Germany. The capitalized "East" and "East Germany" refers to that era when the German Democratic Republic existed.

work to my first e-mail response. It referred to my “inane screed,” asserted that I was a professor because I wasn’t “smart enough to get a real job,” and called me a “loser” because “Never once have you mentioned something leftist/liberal pansies hate to talk about, ‘personal responsibility’!”

E-mails continued to arrive throughout the day. Later in the week, the editorial was reprinted in other newspapers, and a new wave of responses ensued. After my initial shock at the personal excoriations evolved into bemusement, I found that those who took the time to write offered two lines of counterargument. The first follows the logic of the letter above: *Your agenda, somehow related to a position in academia and obviously part of a larger, easily classifiable, liberal group-think, causes you to believe incorrectly that people are socially constructed, that they operate within and against societal norms and expectations, whereas in reality they have complete free will.* This, the letter writers go on to argue, causes me to blame American society and its influence, excusing the individual who should be held personally—and singularly—responsible for his actions. Taken to its extreme, the argument compares me to terrorists who also blame the United States for everything that is wrong with the world. “You and Bin laden [*sic*] are a pair. Everything is America’s fault,” one e-mail proclaimed. In a world but a few months removed from 9/11, such comparisons should not have surprised me.

Others, though somewhat less vitriolic, were uncanny in their resemblance to the first. One saw me as a “charter member of the ‘Blame America First’ society” and a “devotee of the ‘It’s Always Someone Else’s Fault’ cult.” This writer went on to recommend that “you might consider returning to instruct those unfortunate victims, whom you have determined were better off under a failed Socialist experiment in East Germany, on the pitfalls of embracing a culture you

have so ardently rejected.” Another wrote that I had “absolutely no rational grounds for contending the nutcase shot up his school because his delicate psyche was bruised by American culture . . . His actions might just as easily have been a product of child-rearing practices common to your own liberal, socio-ideological class.”

These e-mailers are correct in saying that demonstrating direct causality between societal standards—be they east German or American—and a single person is impossible. In using the word “influence” in the opening paragraph where I discuss “how much America’s influence has pervaded the once-communist and Soviet-controlled German Democratic Republic,” I was suggesting in that overly simplified, brief editorial space that Robert Steinhäuser adopted a Western-style solution to his situation and that such an act indicates a shift in eastern Germans’ perspectives that now align them with western perspectives. If anything, the e-mailers’ free-will position supports my point. In his famous 1963 “Ich bin ein Berliner” speech outside Rathaus Schöneberg, President John Kennedy said of Berlin, “What is true of this city is true of Germany—real, lasting peace in Europe can never be assured as long as one German out of four is denied the elementary right of free men, and that is to make a free choice.” The fall of the Wall provided Steinhäuser his ability to choose, even if he chose badly.

The logic of the second argument reasons: *Germans are Germans, and those who once massacred innocents in the world wars are fated to do it again. Robert Steinhäuser is just the latest incarnation of German evil.* Such an argument relies on a belief in cultural genetics, wherein an inherited predisposition, in this case toward evil, is passed down from generation to generation within a society. One correspondent stated, “Germany needs no lessons from

anyone on how to kill innocent people.” Another wrote that the country that “gave us two world wars and the holocaust hardly needs inspiration from us for violence.” Yet another said, “The killer is the heir to the Nazi and Soviet cultures of mass murder.” Finally, this one even uses a term similar to my “cultural genetics”: “Since when do Germans need outside motivation to commit horrendous acts of violence . . . violence is just part of their cultural profile.”

Even if cultural genetics—representing the nature side of this nature vs. nurture dichotomy—holds some credence, why should we see Steinhäuser, a nineteen-year-old who spent, at most, six years living under the communist regime, as a product of this society? Should it not be his elders—those with much more direct contact with communism and its behaviors—who go on shooting sprees? People’s fundamental values were upended. Many remain conflicted by living in a capitalist marketplace after having been raised in a communist society. They don’t understand how to be capitalists, whatever that might mean. And because some can’t figure it out, or have and don’t like what they see, or are too old to be successfully integrated into the free-market economy, there are people in eastern Germany who would prefer to see a return to GDR times. I have spoken with some of them, and their attitudes are reflected in the popularity of former communists in eastern German elections. And for those who lament what has taken place since *die Wende*—the “turning point” signifying the beginning of reunification—Steinhäuser’s actions provide further evidence that “former times” were indeed better. See, they say, this massacre wouldn’t have happened under the old system. It proves that the new system is unpredictable and dangerous.

While I might concede that either of these lines of reasoning—the personal responsibility or the cultural genet-

ics argument—carries some validity, when taken together, they contradict one another. If Robert Steinhäuser’s “cultural profile” as a German led him to go on the shooting spree, how can he—and only he—be personally responsible for this incident? If he is a manifestation of German culture, he cannot also be a youth willfully capable of accepting or rejecting societal influences. This also leads to questions about American society: If the violent German culture is so obviously reflected in this incident, what do the many more violent and super-violent crimes in the United States, in schools and in society at large, say about our own cultural genetics? And, perhaps more important, what, if anything, can be done about it if we are culturally predisposed to such violence?

Although both camps of e-mail correspondents reject any association between our country and the shooting, Germans themselves do not see it this way. A *Time* magazine article’s title—“Germany’s Columbine”—encapsulates the point of my op-ed piece in two words. In this piece, a German news anchor states, “It’s the kind of thing you expect to happen in America.” Echoing this, a German student points out, “This happens a lot in America, but it’s not just an American thing anymore.” Or as one student’s mother succinctly puts it: “We’ve been Americanized.” Having lived in German society—or at least on the fringe of it—I felt I could share my understanding and knowledge of this perspective in the *Inquirer* piece. Thus, I included the discussion from the police officer as representative of some east Germans’ views. How ironic—and perhaps revealing of their biases—that many of those who e-mailed attributed those words to me.

The solution to this nature vs. nurture debate lies, not surprisingly, somewhere between the two dichotomies. To gain a more complete perspective, one should look at the situation not in terms of *either/or* but *both/and*. We need *both* to hold

Steinhäuser responsible for his actions *and* to acknowledge that society plays a role in such a crime. I see his actions as indicative of, not representative of, eastern Germany's situation. My editorial suggested that Steinhäuser's actions provide a demonstrable signal that the former East Germany has somehow turned a corner. Perhaps I would go so far to say that the shooting serves as an indicator that eastern Germans have bought into Western views.

And isn't this what we wanted when the Wall fell? We did not expect West Germans to adopt East German (that is, communist) values, but that West German culture would flow eastward. I do not claim that capitalism is inherently evil. I am not trying to defend the young man's cowardly actions. I am not arguing for a return to the GDR—the Stasi was certainly no Cub Scout troop. But to pretend that American values are, like people themselves, subject to a border check and can be forced to remain in the United States is naïve and isolationist. Would those who argue against America's sphere of influence extending beyond our borders also presume that the classics should not be studied, that the ideas found in Greek and British writings should be turned away at our borders? Would they postulate that terrorists' (re)actions are completely unrelated to the spread of American values and influence? The e-mailer who claimed, "You and Bin Laden are a pair. Everything is America's fault" was at least partially correct. While I take umbrage at the inference, I do believe that the terrorist Osama bin Laden would not have existed without an America to direct his destructive anger toward, in the same way Moby Dick spurs Ahab's maniacal actions.

I will also forward another comparison that, were this an opinion piece, might inspire a new wave of e-mail rants: In their aggregate, the three dozen responses to my editorial

point out how the Internet has created its own form of surveillance, one that echoes the East German Stasi. Those who publish in a digitally mediated world—either through corporate channels such as the *Philadelphia Inquirer* or through blogging and social networking—face a multitude of unknown and anonymous watchers who are only too eager to police and judge. Just look at the comments section following any controversial topic. Our perceptions of what we're willing to share have changed in an Internet world; our willingness to impose our perspectives on others has also shifted. And while the vast network of East German informants who spied on colleagues, friends, and even spouses may have reached one in five citizens at its zenith, these people had to be recruited by the Stasi; cybersociety encourages anyone and everyone to fulfill this role.

I was reassured that my perspective was not completely off base when I received an e-mail from my friend Manuela Linde, whose school-age daughter, Anne-Katrin, I initially worried about when I heard the news of the Erfurt shooting. Manuela wrote:

Almost one week after this tragedy happened, everybody here tries to find out reasons why. People do not talk about anything else—in town, on the tram, at work. Tomorrow is the public funeral service on Domplatz. People never have met there for a sad reason, at least since I have lived in Erfurt. I am quite sure that there will be more people than ever before, even more than on Dec 31, 1999. It certainly will be broadcasted all over the world.

Of course, there is not only one reason for why this could happen. The explanations go in three directions. First, how such a young boy could legally buy these lethal weapons (they already discuss to tighten up the German law). Sec-

ond, that violence is present everywhere and every day on TV, in computer games, on the Internet. Third, Thuringia is the only German state in which pupils do not receive any kind of school leaving certificate if they fail the *Abitur*.² Due to this, the pressure of passing the *Abitur* is enormous.

Your article made clear how I have not heard anybody seeking the explanation about the non-existent future prospects of the young generation or the contrasts after the Wall came down. Perhaps it does not fit in the election campaign that has already started half a year before the elections. I do not know if the pupils in gymnasiums have already completely recognized their situation. It is the parents who either have too much work so that they do not have time for the problems of their children or they are unemployed and are so busy with their own problems that they do not listen to their children either. There was a survey among young people below age 25 last year. 70% said they will definitely leave Eastern Germany during the next years. About 15% were undecided and only 15% said they would stay. What a future!

It is good to hear your view on the things since you are an insider and outsider at once.

I found this last sentence heartening. For the year that I lived in Erfurt, I felt myself an outsider in the east. My inability to speak German well and my temporary status made me feel removed from society. Yet, we ventured to Erfurt for exactly that reason. My wife and I were somehow attract-

2. The German education system tracks students based on ability, starting in fifth grade. Graduates of a *Gymnasium* take the *Abitur* exam, which permits them to then study at German universities. When Steinhäuser was expelled from Gutenberg Gymnasium, he was left with no opportunity to obtain a degree. The Thuringian government has since rectified this situation.

ed to the idea of having all the rules that govern our daily lives—housing, food acquisition, transportation, and, most important, basic communication—yanked out from under us and then seeing how well we would function. And to do this in a society that had recently undergone a similar shift made it even more attractive. Of course, we had our safety net: employment while there, a house and jobs to return to. This made our risk-taking less adventuresome than it might have been, less realistic than it would have been for eastern Germans. But we still learned something during our stay, and not just about life in eastern Germany. While living there, and afterward as the discussion above shows, we became more aware of the matrix of cultural assumptions we Americans—like people in any society—operate within.

This was affirmed by the e-mails. In them, I saw a refusal to believe that anything American culture creates could have an impact elsewhere, despite U.S. television shows such as *Baywatch* and *Wheel of Fortune* being among the world's most syndicated; a refusal to consider that the Germany of today could be different from the Germany of the early and mid-twentieth century; and a refusal to imagine that people and circumstances change. In her September 5, 2002, "Give Class of 2006 a Chance to Create Its Own Syllabus," *Philadelphia Inquirer* editorialist Jane Eisner contends that such views result from "a fear of the unknown, a fear that the familiar will be replaced by the foreign—when, of course, true education is all about venturing into other, unsettling worlds, trying them on in your mind, and growing stronger for the effort."

I believe that those who e-mailed me about my editorial—and the dozens or even hundreds who only muttered under their breath or said something to the person across the breakfast table—found in me what in biology is called

a “search image”: an object of prey. While focusing on the search image may increase the likelihood for success, the predator must ignore other information in the landscape, reducing its competency for performing other tasks, often to its own detriment. This situation is illustrated in the depiction of a small fish about to be devoured by a larger fish, which is in turn about to be devoured by an even larger fish. When my editorial entered the letter writers’ line of sight, I became their search image, the prey they had been seeking. Like my correspondents, I too am a predator focusing on my search image; unlike them, I will admit to my limitations.

1. Breaking Down the Wall

Because this book examines the importance of psychological, linguistic, and attitudinal walls, my hope was to begin by clearly and succinctly laying out the facts concerning the barricade that ran through Germany during communist rule in the German Democratic Republic. For those of us not from Germany, what the Wall represented symbolically was always more important than its actual function. As a physical manifestation of the Iron Curtain, the Wall conveniently fit the Cold War narrative. Its fall brought with it the collapse of the East German state, the return of a unified Germany, the end of communism in Europe, and the thawing of Cold War entrenchments. But like the small ball of mercury my ninth-grade biology teacher so naively let us roll around on the black lab bench, whenever I try to put my thumb on a definition of the Wall, it skitters away from me. The Wall itself—despite its symbolic concreteness—is not easily describable.

To begin, referring to the Wall in the singular is inaccurate. There was not really one wall but two—the Berlin Wall that encircled West Berlin and the one that ran between the two Germanys that had been divided since World War II's end. The Berlin Wall—the Wall—is the one people

are most familiar with, the one that received so much media attention since first being erected in 1961, yet it was actually the last part of the Wall to be built. Between the end of World War II and 1952, Germans could freely travel between eastern and western portions of the divided country. In May of that year, concerned over the exodus of people—especially skilled workers—that has been estimated at close to three and half million in a country of eighteen million, the East German government acted to restrict the outward flow of citizens by constructing a fence along the inner border between East and West. Shaped like a very crooked “L,” this wall eventually zigzagged from the Baltic Sea several hundred miles south before turning east and running to then-Czechoslovakia. In Berlin—an island within East Germany—the borders remained open, with some traffic restrictions, for nine more years. In August 1961, this border was closed without warning and the first concrete barricades installed a few days later.

In addition to the inaccuracy of referring to the two walls as a singular entity, to speak of the Wall as simply a wall is also incorrect. In reality, the Wall consisted of multiple components and, over the years, went through many iterations. Like the people it was meant to keep in and out, the Wall lived through several generations of change. When first constructed, the Wall was really nothing more than a barbed-wire fence. This was soon replaced with concrete barriers, which evolved into a fifteen-foot-high wall that blocked outsiders’ ability to see—and get access to—what lay behind.

Eventually, this one wall also became two walls because the wall keeping people in ended up not being the same one keeping people out. A parallel set of walls were separated by a twenty-to-thirty-yard fortified obstacle course known as No Man’s Land or the “death strip” because those who en-

tered it would be shot without warning. Moving from East to West—as those who entered this forbidden zone were most likely to be doing—one would be confronted with some combination of the following impediment-ridden area, depending on the region of the country the Wall was located in: the hinterland fence, an electrified fence that set off an alarm when touched, anti-vehicle traps and trenches, a patrol strip, another strip filled with nail beds to blow out tires, observation towers, a strip of raked sand to detect incursions, a corridor with watchdogs, and tripwires attached to machine guns. The final barrier always consisted of the *Mauer feindwärts*, the “wall facing the enemy.”

The view of the Wall from East and West also ended up being quite different. For those in the East, the Wall represented a bland cover to an intriguing book they would never be allowed to read, though they might catch glimpses of random pages—from news sources, sanctioned visits, relatives, rumors, or Western television signals. Even taking pictures of the Wall from the East German side was illegal. West Germans treated the Wall more as a coloring book on which to express themselves through art and graffiti. Because the GDR did not wish to seem overly aggressive in constructing the Wall, it was placed a few feet back from the actual border. For an artist standing near the western side of the *Mauer feindwärts*, each stroke became an act of defiance as he or she stood on East German soil, simultaneously defiling and beautifying their side of the *Mauer feindwärts*.

Similarly, the East and West German governments viewed this structure differently. The GDR maintained that the border between the Germanys was an international one, thus confirming, in their view, the German states’ independence from one another. Officials referred to the Wall as the *antifaschistischer Schutzwall*, the “anti-fascist protec-

tive barrier.” According to this moniker, the Wall helped East Germany keep marauding fascists from entering. West Germans preferred to see the border not as an international one, but as an internal or “inner German border.” This term retained the perception that Germany was temporarily divided rather than being two separate countries, both of which happened to be populated by German speakers. The division extended to border crossers. The GDR viewed those leaving the country without permission as criminals, *Republikflüchtlinge*, “fugitives from the republic.” West Germans saw such people as refugees of a despotic government.

These different perspectives necessitate an examination of the role and function of any wall. Normally a wall is a structure meant to keep elements, observers, and intruders from seeing or entering a particular area. It encloses and protects. While the East German walls functioned in this way, they did so not by walling out but by walling in. The Berlin Wall, in particular, did not simply divide the city in two, but enclosed West Berlin. It functioned, also counterintuitively, not so much to keep West Germans out of the East but to keep East Germans within the larger area outside the Wall. No one, we must remember, was shot running from West to East.

Such actions are important to consider, as well. The physical Wall’s ability to keep anyone from entering or exiting the GDR was ultimately symbolic. With enough time, determination, and luck, most anyone could have gone over, under, or through the Wall. It was the guards—embodiments of the GDR state—who prevented this from occurring. It was the guards who stood between East German citizens and their attempts to cross the Wall. It was the guards who shot, on order, about 150 East Germans trying to escape to the West.

Ironically, in the early days of the Wall these same guards

were often the ones attempting to escape. The GDR adopted a deterrence strategy that involved indoctrinating guards into state ideology and, just as important, placing them in groups of two and three to keep watch on one another. These tactics—indoctrination and mutual observation—would come to define the GDR.

Robert Frost once contemplated, “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall, / That wants it down.” Yet the sentiment is often not enough to bring down a wall. In his 1963 “Ich bin ein Berliner” speech, President Kennedy said that the Wall was “dividing a people who wish to be joined together.” Still, it wasn’t until a quarter of a century later that the Wall’s fall gave these people the opportunity to do so. And the reality of being joined can be painful to those who experience it. Though the physical Wall may have fallen years ago, mental ones remain. Germans speak of *die Mauer im Kopf*, the “wall in the head.” Perhaps Kennedy was right that ideally those two people wanted to be one, but the reality of doing so has created a new inner German border.

Stereotypes persist, with the eastern Germans seeing western Germans as arrogant colonialists, while westerners complain of whiny and self-pitying easterners. A large majority of eastern Germans see themselves as neither part of their former country nor part of the combined country. Even today, only 22 percent of eastern Germans consider themselves “real citizens” of the reunified Germany, though that percentage grows to 40 for those under age twenty-five. Thus, when Lutz Rathenow says of reunification in *Ost-Berlin: Life Before the Wall Fell*, “Growing together takes time,” one imagines that perhaps he left off “and the passing of those who refuse to accept change.” Just as people once built, maintained, and patrolled the Wall, it remains people

who retain these walls in their heads, disavowing the shift that many call progress. Some who lived it prefer to romanticize the country's history and their individual stories, relics from a time spoken of in the past tense but for them not yet past.

The demise of the Wall has necessitated a new kind of guard: one who not only witnesses (or has witnessed) but who also questions upon seeing, one whose trigger finger works a keyboard, a paintbrush, or a camera rather than a gun. During our stay, I ran across Brian Rose's *The Lost Border*. The book documents through photos his travels along the Iron Curtain beginning in the mid-1980s. In "Oebisfelde, East/West German Border, 1987" the photographer, who is not pictured, stands in a fallow field several hundred feet from the Wall, its collapse still unforeseen. Mottled by sunlight, the foreground consists of snow that is in places gray and in places brown but remains largely white. In the background, the stark light is unencumbered by cloud shadows.

Even the drifting snow appears afraid to approach East Germany. It stops a third of the way up the photo, replaced by parallel ruts of tillage moving away from the viewer. These lines would converge at the horizon if not for the thick concrete line dividing the middle of the photo. The top half of the photo reveals more gray, a sky as colorless as the area it rests above.

The small town of Oebisfelde squeezes between the Wall and sky. Tops of houses, church steeples, and barren trees peek over the Wall. A dark plume rises ominously from the middle of town. The smoke seems to begin at a church, as if it were on fire, and drifts low across the town, floating past a guard tower as it moves across the Wall, uninhibited, uninterrogated, a GDR gift to the West.

In my imagination, this picture was not taken by a photographer who parked his car and walked through the field, coming closer and closer to the Wall, knowing he was being observed by the East German guards and so making sure he kept a safe distance. Rather, I envision this from the perspective of someone who was, a few moments earlier, much closer to the Wall. The feeling is one of the viewer, a *Republikflüchtlinge* perhaps, taking one last look back over a shoulder as he scampers away from the area.

Maybe I imagine this perspective now because it fits my view of the world since leaving eastern Germany, my search image being limited by my experiences. More accurately, though, I believe that my year in the former GDR bears similarity to that moment when one emerges from a darkened interior into the sunlight. A brief period of near blindness ensues as pupils constrict against the light's overstimulation. The greater the contrast between light and darkness, the longer this adjustment takes. *In the Shadows of a Fallen Wall* captures some of those instances when I paused in the blinding light, waiting for my pupils—those light receptors that turn everything upside down before the brain rights it all again—to become more constricted and thus more receptive to seeing what was before me. This decreased field of vision increased my sphere of understanding. Trying to capture in words these witnessed images of my world turned upside down is no less complicated than trying to describe the Wall itself.