

ГОСПОДИ! ПОМОГИ МНЕ ВЫЖИТЬ

ESSAY BERLIN

Cold War kissing cousins: Soviet president Leonid Brezhnev locks lips with GDR leader Erich Honecker - the wall became a graffiti canvas; barbed wire modifications in 1961 (below)



THE WALL



THE FALL

As Berlin celebrates 20 years since the collapse of both the Berlin Wall and communism, award-winning author **ANNA FUNDER** reflects on the conflict between remembering and forgetting what this symbol of Cold War division stood for.



Clockwise from right: East Side Gallery; Peaceful Revolution exhibition; the wall attracted the curious in 1966; graffiti in 1981



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MY FRIEND KLAUS Renft was the self-styled East German “Mik Jegger”, the bad boy of GDR [German Democratic Republic] rock. In his country, the staples of rock’n’roll – became searing political protest anthems. By 1975 communist authorities could bear it no more and he was kicked out into West

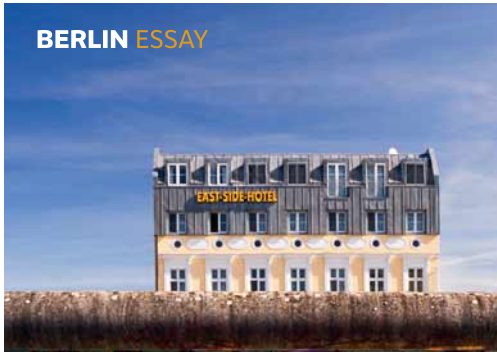
Germany. Then, in a move as practical as it was bizarre, they replaced Renft with a more obedient frontman, installed a Stasi agent as manager and the band played on. The public would get what it wanted, but under government control.

Klaus lived hard on the only drugs available in the east, booze and tobacco. When I spoke to him in 2000 he described the state of his brain as “dog food”. He was glad, he said, to have the copies of files the Stasi had kept on him. A ghost-written diary, they refreshed his mind as to the life he’d led in the GDR. Renft died in 2006, so it was a surprise to see the Klaus Renft Combo performing in May this year, at the opening of the major exhibition in Berlin commemorating the 20th anniversary of the fall of the wall. Renft has again been replaced, this time by a friend and for an audience in united, democratic Germany. After a period of post-unification >

A major exhibition in Berlin commemorating the fall of the wall



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Clockwise from above: Palast der Republik; DDR Museum; East Side Gallery



The wall cut off streets abruptly and sliced right through the city

neglect, his beautiful rock ballads and anthems represent the survival of individual conscience in the dictatorship.

The exhibition, at Alexanderplatz in the centre of the old East Berlin, consists of a huge, star-shaped arrangement of outdoor panels and audio treatments telling the story of the peaceful protests of 1989, the fall of the wall and the reunification of Germany on October 3, 1990, after 45 years of Cold War division. It is just one of many commemorative events this year. Even the Australian embassy is in on the act – its building was the home of the Central Committee of the Communist Party immediately after WWII. As for the wall itself, you can take a GPS-guided walking tour along its trail, organised bicycle tour, or choose the lower-tech version by following information columns dotted along its path. The celebrations culminate this month with the toppling of a series of giant polystyrene dominos along its course and a massive public party at the Brandenburg gate.

A visitor would need a map more than 20 years old to find where the wall went. An installation about 90m wide with two walls, sand traps, dog runs and guard towers, it cut off

streets abruptly and sliced right through the city, encircling the democratic western part from August 1961. But remarkably little remains. There's a small stretch called the East Side Gallery, and not much else. A portion of it has been re-created at the Berlin Wall Memorial at Bernauer Strasse, complete with raked sand and guard towers. For all its painstaking exactitude, no-one thought to reproduce the bright graffiti that adorned the western side of the wall. This museum is a strange, sanitised creation – as if the wall is easier to remember and somehow less painful if the real thing is gone.

In Berlin, the question of whether to remember or forget is written on the serially renamed streets and rebuilt buildings. When I lived there in the 1990s, the Palast der Republik, the parliament and cultural centre of the GDR, a massive 1970s monster, was simply cordoned off. No-one could decide whether to make it into a memorial warning from the past, or get rid of it. Nearby, Hitler's bunker was uncovered in post-wall building works. No-one could decide about that, either. A memorial could become a shrine for neo-Nazis, but to erase it altogether might signal forgetting or denial. In the end, >

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BERLIN ESSAY

the bunker was reburied just as it was. The mayor said, perhaps in *another* 50 years people would be able to decide what to do. These debates show how divided Germans are about remembering a fractured past.

The Palast der Republik had been built on the site of the palace of the Prussian kings, damaged in WWII. Finally, after a 14-year debate, it was pulled down over 2006-08. But what should be done on arguably the most important symbolic site in the capital? Arguments raged, but in the end the Federal Parliament decided to *rebuild* the palace of the Prussian kings with its original facade. Like a band with a new leader singing the same songs or a wall rebuilt cleaner and less menacing, history can imitate itself and call it memory. It just depends which history you choose.

And there's the rub. The people keenest to forget the true history of the GDR are the ex-Stasi. Unpunished, they are now bolder, to the point of denying the GDR was a dictatorship at all. While it might be fun to go to the kitsch new DDR Museum and sit in a Trabi or peer at bizarre, anatomically correct plasticene nudists, to understand the true effect of the wall, visit Hohenschönhausen Museum in the former Stasi prison. Go on a tour with a former political prisoner such as Sigrid Paul, whose baby was separated from her the night the wall



Miles of Stasi files at Hohenschönhausen Museum

was built. As she says, “the wall went through my heart”. For all the debate and acrimony about whether to rip down or rebuild, for everyone who has an authentic piece of the Berlin Wall at home, the thing to remember is the courage of people such as Klaus Renft and Sigrid Paul who protested while it was up. This is the wall's unseen legacy, and it is much more important than any memorial, real or repro. 🌐

Anna Funder is the author of Stasiland (Text)



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