

Report on One of the First Deaths at the Zonal Border (August 30, 1961)

Abstract

Observers on the Western side of the fortified border occasionally witnessed East German flight attempts. Here, a Western newspaper reports on one young man's dramatic escape attempt and the fatal consequences.

Source

Yesterday at the Zonal Border: SED Henchman Shot Refugee in the Teltow Canal Berlin, August 29

Yesterday, members of a Factory Combat Group [*Betriebskampfgruppe*] shot a refugee who was intending to swim across the Teltow Canal at the West Berlin zonal border in Lichterfelde. At 2:10 pm, eight to ten carbine shots suddenly whipped through the silence at the war-damaged Fritz Schweitzer Bridge. A man desperately swam for his life.

He had managed to break through the cordon of Factory Combat Groups, People's Police, and "People's Army" troops and had reached an embankment with dense underbrush. The machine gun posts in the treetops to his left had not noticed him; nor had anyone in the foxholes on the right side (directly adjacent to the gas lines over the Teltow Canal) seen the roughly 30-year-old Eastern-Zone resident remove his overclothes, hang a briefcase around his neck with a cord, and dive into the water from the embankment. The canal is 50 meters wide at that point.

The smack as the man hit the water jerked Ulbricht's mercenaries out of their *Mittagsruhe* [post-lunch rest period]. They shot at the swimmer from all sides. Many shots missed and went on to hit the West Berlin side of the Teltow Canal. The border between East and West runs right down the middle [of the canal] for several kilometers. The refugee dove under the hail of shots twice. He had almost reached the middle—freedom—when a man from the Factory Combat Group jumped out of the brush, raised his machine pistol, and released a fire of bullets over the water. He hit the refugee in the head. The impact of the shot caused the refugee to spin around in the water; he sank backwards. "You pigs, you dogs, don't shoot at your own compatriots," shouted a young man on the Eastern side, where several workers were clearing the underbrush along the border strip. He was immediately surrounded by a number of men in uniform. They took him away. He waved one last time toward the Western sector and called out, "Take care, guys, you won't be seeing me again."

This was the second murder of a refugee by Communist henchmen within five days, and in no time the embankment was swarming with members of the army, the People's Police, the Factory Combat Groups, State Security people, and the Eastern Zone fire brigade. The killer marksman lit a cigarette. Officers and Eastern journalists surrounded him. They congratulated him, patted him on the back in recognition. This "hero" accepted the congratulations with laughter. Rubber dinghies were set into the water from both sides of the canal. Fire brigades from East and West, each on their own territory, combed the muddy, seaweed-filled, overgrown canal floor with search lines and poles.

Camera people on the embankment on the Western side aimed their telephoto lenses at the thirty to forty soldiers on the Eastern side, who were watching the search action through binoculars. When they

noticed that they were being photographed they took cover and were rarely seen after that. After two hours of futile searching, the Western fire brigade discontinued its dinghy search operation. An amphibious vehicle suddenly appeared on the opposite shore at 5:35 pm but was not deployed. At 6:00 pm the Eastern fire brigade finally removed its two dinghies from the water. Fifteen minutes later the West Berlin water police appeared on the scene. One officer jumped into the water with swimming trunks borrowed from a photojournalist. But nothing at all could be seen in the turbid, 5-meter-deep water. At 7:00 pm two fire brigade dinghies were again deployed. But this operation also ended without success. The canal would not release the murdered man.

Source: G. Sch., "Gestern an der Zonengrenze: SED-Scherge erschöß Flüchtling im Teltowkanal," *Tagesspiegel*, August 30, 1961.

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