

The Second Founding of the GDR (Retrospective Account, 2011)

Abstract

In an interview marking the fiftieth anniversary of the building of the Wall, a Western historian claims that the Wall actually had a stabilizing effect on the Cold War, insofar as it signaled that the GDR was there to stay. The Wall, he suggests, forced both East and West Germans to accept the permanence of the SED dictatorship.

Source

1961 Was the Second Founding of the GDR

In an interview, historian Edgar Wolfrum talks about the world-political significance of the Wall and the passivity of the Germans.

[...]

You say that the building of the Wall had a “calming effect” on world politics. How so?

It had a “calming effect” in two respects. First, for the GDR: people could no longer escape, and therefore the state was able to stabilize itself. Nineteen sixty-one was the second founding of the GDR, as it were. Second, on the international level: in 1961 the Western Allies, but also the Soviet Union, were sick and tired of constantly dealing with the conflict center that was Berlin. At the time, both Washington and Moscow were gearing up for global tasks. The Cuba crisis a year later speaks volumes in that regard. The U. S. was already slowly becoming embroiled in the Vietnam War. A *modus vivendi* had been found with the building of the Wall, and the Cold War had been put on hold for a time, at least in Central Europe. Both superpowers were satisfied with this solution, however awful it was for the Germans.

Did Moscow prod the leadership in East Berlin or slow it down when it came to building the Wall?

This question has not been conclusively answered, access to documents in Moscow remains blocked. But we should not under any circumstances turn away from German responsibility. Walter Ulbricht, the chairman of the Council of State, had been urging the Kremlin since the mid-1950s to do something. After all, he saw that his state was hemorrhaging from a mass exodus. Nikita Khrushchev, the head of the Kremlin, had scruples to the very end. He had to see communism in a global context. Building a wall to imprison one’s own population was, of course, a damning indictment for any workers’ and peasants’ state. That’s why he kept the brakes on until the very end. Still: without Moscow’s approval, the Wall would never have been built.

The Bundesnachrichtendienst [West German Federal Intelligence Service] has just now opened its archives. Do they reveal that Chancellor Konrad Adenauer could not have been as surprised by the building of the Wall as has always been claimed?

I wouldn’t go too far with this. All the important politicians knew that something was going on. The building of the Wall was a gigantic logistical task, materials had to be gathered for months outside the gates of Berlin, workers and troops had to be brought together. Perhaps people didn’t know that it would turn into a wall, but it was known days ahead of time that measures would be taken to cordon off

the city.

The subsequent deaths along the Wall happened, in part, under the eyes of the global public—for example, when eighteen-year-old Peter Fechter bled to death. At the same time, many Germans in the West cared little about the lives of GDR citizens. What was the source of this indifference?

The meekness, even passivity, especially of the West Germans in the face of their country's division is indeed remarkable. The West Germans had wound up on the right side of the Cold War; they were doing fine. Evidently, their wallets were closer to their hearts than any national feelings. The East Germans, on the other hand, were punished twice for German history—first under Hitler and then under Pieck, Ulbricht, and Honecker.

The Wall is a symbol of inhuman politics. But to this day, states close themselves off. Do we learn nothing from history?

An important man [Hegel] once said: “The main thing we learn from history is that we learn nothing from it.” I’m not that pessimistic. We’ve definitely been sensitized by the Wall. But the great promise of 1989—a life in peace, freedom, and with transparent borders—has, of course, been reduced to an absurdity. Also, by the Europeans, who are sealing themselves off, for example, from immigration from Africa. Needless to say, there is a profound difference. The walls of today are not preventing resident populations from leaving their countries; rather, countries are closing themselves off from the outside. They want to keep out refugees who are fleeing economic misery or other unwanted people. But one thing holds true for all: every wall is the demonstration of a political failure.

Source: Rainer Pörtner, Interview mit Historiker Edgar Wolfrum: “1961 war die zweite Gründung der DDR,” *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, August 7, 2011, pp. 2–4. Republished with permission from Prof. Wolfrum. Available online at:

<https://www.stuttgarter-zeitung.de/inhalt.interview-mit-historiker-edgar-wolfrum-1961-war-die-zweite-gruendung-der-ddr.ae4b1518-d3a2-4cfb-9248-268cd0fd3ea0.html>

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Recommended Citation: The Second Founding of the GDR (Retrospective Account, 2011), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/two-germanies-1961-1989/ghdi:document-5000>> [July 12, 2025].