

EAST GERMAN BORDER In Vicinity of Helmstedt, West Germany 1980

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During the Cold War there was the Berlin Wall, which surrounded West Berlin, separating it from East Berlin and East Germany



And there was Checkpoint Charlie



There was also another border. 1,346 kilometers of fences, walls, towers, patrols, dogs, mines, and guns. While this presentation concerns the area near Helmstedt, West Germany, it is well representative of the entire border which separated East and West Germany.



In the Helmstedt area, the border as decided September 12, 1944, by representatives of the United States, United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union, was placed at the old provincial border of the Kingdom of Hanover to the west and Prussia to the east. Magdeburger Tower, east of Helmstedt was built during the Hanover/Prussia days as an early warning post.



Next to some of the new border markers



Next to some of the new border markers, the old stones can be seen



To the south the border is formed by the Aue River



The East German border was divided into 5 to 8 kilometer sectors. Each sector had one command post, manned by 8 men. The National Peoples Army border soldiers served 2 years. During this time they received 2 weeks leave and 2 weekends off. They worked 12 hours a day and are paid 44 East German marks per month. That was equivalent to 11 West German marks or 6 American dollars.



In 1980 the National People's Army commenced painting their command posts and towers. This was not intended for camouflage, rather to break the rough outlines.



Originally the East German border was a single mesh fence and a ten meter plowed strip. Later wooden and cement pillboxes...



And wooden towers appeared.



Then the East Germans began building these cylinder shaped towers with cathouses on top. In 1972 sever thunderstorms blew 45 of these towers down.



The new tower was a pre-fabricated structure that took three days to build once the foundation was set. In all towers, as in all patrols and movements, were two men (usually one married and one single) to watch each other.



The construction of these towers and the border itself never ceased until the collapse of East Germany.



On the fences that ran from the Baltic to Czechoslovakia were the SM-70 automatic guns.



SM – 70s

The SM-70s were originally designed by the Nazis forces to be used in concentration camps, however the weapons were not perfected before the end of the war. The technology fell into Soviet hands, who in turn perfected it and gave it to the East Germans.

The metal encasing was the result of a man named Michael Gartenschlager. Herr Gartenschlager was former an East German political prisoner, who managed a successful escape to the West. When he arrived in West Germany the found there was little knowledge about the SM-70s. He stole one, then soon after stole another. While trying to steal a third he was killed by East German guards.

After the thefts the East Germans placed metal boxes over the guns to prevent further pilferage. Inside the guns were an average of 115 pieces of metal and its blast effect was about the same as a wide range shotgun.

In addition to the metal boxes, wire screens were mounted on the fence above the guns. Some company commanders went to the additional trouble to aim the lower gun directly towards the top



In 1980 the old field mines were being updated with an antipersonnel mine, much like the American claymore. Shown in this photo are the snappers



Their mission was to locate the old mines, which had been in place for about 15 years, and bow the mines in place. After this was completed the new mines were installed.



In places where guards cannot have continuous view of the border, dogs were placed, for noise detection and attack. Even though the dogs were placed on a lead, the dogs were excellent deterrent to a hopeful defector. This is exceptionally true when the dogs were placed next to a mine field.



The photo was taken a week after the minefield was updated. Prior to blowing of the old mines this ground was all green. The dogs were removed during detonation, but this dog does not appear to be ready to go back on the ground.



The East German guards used several vehicles on the border, also always manned by at least two men. The light cargo truck (Gas P3)...



The Trabant patrol car and motorcycle...



The Robur 2002 heavy cargo truck and troop transport usually used for shift change or work details...



And the helicopter, NATO designated as the MI-2 Hoplite, which was used for aerial reconnaissance



Only people completely trusted were allowed outside of the fence. This soldier was assigned a photograph mission, however he was not allowed outside alone



Only once did his partner show himself and then only for a split second. As you will notice...



No matter where this soldier moved to take pictures he was always in his of his partner was hiding behind the dirt pile.



Here there was no mound to hide behind. These men were up the hill, and working with, the sappers shown earlier



The man of the left, armed with an AK 47, Kalashnikov rifle, is one of the two guards. The man of the right, with the camera is the officer-in-charge. In the background is one of the snappers.



This man keeping his equipment covered was responsible for detonation of the mines.



Hotensleben



Hotensleben Narrative

- The village of Hotensleben in 1945 had a population of 8,000. In 1980 the population had dropped to 2,500.
- 1st fence was the original
- 1st wall was built as a detainer
- Behind the wall was a road, like the fence, it ran the length of the border
- Of the far side of the open area was a plowed strip, which was tilled monthly and checked daily for footprints
- 2nd fence was mounted with electrical detection to the command post
- 2nd wall was to prevent anyone inside East Germany from seeing what was between them and freedom, use of deadly force started at this wall
- The next 500 meters was a forbidden zone, except for village residents and government approved visitors
- The following 5 kilometers was a restricted zone

All that once separated Hotensleben from what became West Germany was the Aue River. In 1945 a West German woman used to walk across this bridge to visit her brother. During the existence of these barriers if she had wished to see him she had to drive for 2½ hours through Helmstedt and Marienborn, and on the route prescribed to her by East German officials. As of 1980 the woman still lived within 200 meters of her brother, but she no longer saw him because of...



Personal fears. However, when her brother turned 65 years old he could come to see his sister and even stay in West Germany, without East German pension



The only breaks in the fence was at 8 railway, 9 highway, and 2 river crossings. One of the three autobahn routes was at Helmstedt. This one was used by all British, French, and American military travelers.



Allied travelers were processed at Checkpoint Alpha. This modernized checkpoint was officially opened on October 5, 1979



Prior to travelling, or immediately after travelling, on the East German Autobahn all travelers were briefed or debriefed by a military policeman of their respectfully country



If enroute Berlin the traveler proceeded into East Germany to Soviet
Checkpoint Marienborn (by large tower)



All under the watchful eye of...



The East Germans



Also in Helmstedt was once of the 8 railway crossings



Near Harbke forest. The train proceeded past the light when assured the train engineer that the track was still open for entry and under the white catwalk used by East Germans conducting visual inspections of the train



Next to the Harbke Forest was the East/West German coal mine



This mine was shared by both countries and agreements were made to allow the West Germans to mine the hard coal inside East Germany and the East Germans to mine the soft coal inside West Germany



However, the border signs



and the East German guards remained



At one time this East German power plant provided all the power to the region, East and West. In turn West Germany provided the water to the same area.



Then East Germany shut off the power to West Germany's area. The West had to build their own power plant on their side of the coal mine. In response to East Germany cutting off power service, West Germany stop providing water



The East German people were told by their government that the fences and barriers were built to prevent the West from invading East Germany



This claim had several shortfalls which the East German people recognized



As noted is this barrier under construction, the outriggers for the barbed wire was placed inward



There were four organizations that worked the West German side of the border. The Bundesgrenzschutz (translated “Federal Border Soldiers”) is a highly trained paramilitary organization



The Zolls (Customs) were the workhorses of the border. These were the people who every day walked every foot of the border with their dogs. They always knew the exact situation of the entire border



Polizei involvement on the border concerned criminal activity and teaming with other West German authorities



The British Frontier Service (BFS) consisted of four men who worked the British sector of the East/West German border. All British military operations and helicopter flights within one kilometer of the border required BFS escort. Pictured is Tommy Jones who worked the closest with the Americans



This marker, often confused as the exact border, was the East German's way of showing their national colors. The plaque, bolted through the post to prevent theft, stated Deutsches Demokratische Republik.



West Germans never gave up on the country once again being reunited. Translated this sign states, "Here is Germany not the end, over there is Fatherland."

