



Niederkirchnerstrasse & Wilhelmstrasse, 1984



Niederkirchnerstrasse & Wilhelmstrasse, 2019

THE FREEDOM OF BERLIN

Working in West Berlin in 1984, the British photographer John Davies became fascinated by the Wall as a symbol of the cruelty of the cold war. When he returned this year to shoot the same locations, he found a city healed and changed beyond recognition. By *Guy Chazan*



Checkpoint Charlie, 1984



Former site of Checkpoint Charlie, 2019



Potsdamer Platz, 1984



Potsdamer Platz, 2019

‘There was a horror about the Wall. It was shocking for me at the time – an affront’

A city interrupted. That was what seemed so chilling about 1980s Berlin. The Wall didn’t just cut the city into two: it dissected roads, amputated tramlines and dismembered some of its main thoroughfares, turning once busy transport arteries into dead-ends.

“There was a horror about it,” says John Davies. “It was shocking for me at the time – an affront.”

The British photographer produced his first Berlin pictures in 1984, on a commission from the International Building Exhibition (IBA), a West Berlin showcase for new architecture and urban design and for visions of how to rebuild the still battered, beleaguered city.

No one at the IBA told him to photograph the Wall. But Davies, in his thirties at the time, kept coming back to it. “It was striking and shocking,” he recalls. He was also fascinated by the sheer volume of graffiti and street art that covered it, much of it a “visual display of resistance” against a structure that kept 16 million people penned in for a total of 28 years, and came to symbolise the sheer cruelty – and absurdity – of the cold war.

Davies’s 1984 pictures, all taken from the western side, reflect an edifice that was never “just” a wall. Beyond the simple concrete barrier that divided the city between 1961 and 1989 there were watchtowers, a wide “death strip” marked by anti-vehicle trenches, mesh fencing, barbed wire and the infamous beds of nails nicknamed “Stalin’s lawn”. After more than 20 years the “Anti-Fascist Protective Wall”, as it was known in East German propaganda, had become an immutable fact of the city’s geography, as permanent as the river Spree and the forests and lakes of Brandenburg.

And then, a few years later, it was gone.

Davies, who has since become one of Britain’s best-known documentary photographers, returned to Berlin this year, at the age of 69. His mission was to photograph the same locations he had captured in 1984 – but this time without the Wall. “It’s now as if it never existed,” he says. “Both sides of the city have smoothly integrated, and some places are unrecognisable.”

Few artists are as qualified to investigate Berlin’s transformation: Davies has spent much of his career documenting the changing face of cities and of industrial landscapes, particularly in Britain. One set of his pictures shows Easington colliery in County Durham in 1983 and the same landscape two decades later, after the mines were shuttered and the tower winders demolished. All we see is a large patch of grass, but the spectre of unemployment and social decline hangs heavy in the air.

In Berlin, the changes that had taken place since the cold war ended were even greater – so great that Davies often struggled to find the spots he had photographed 35 years earlier. Even ►



Site of Gestapo headquarters, Niederkirchnerstrasse, 1984



Topographie des Terrors (Topography of Terror) Museum, Niederkirchnerstrasse, 2019



Fernsehturm Tower II (TV Tower), Axel-Springer-Strasse, 1984



Fernsehturm Tower II (TV Tower), Axel-Springer-Strasse, 2019

◀ hours of research on Google Street View left him none the wiser. Sometimes he “had to pass a building five times” before he recognised it from before.

Seeing the 1984 and 2019 images juxtaposed, one is left with the sense of a city once wounded, now healed. The contrast between then and now is strongest in the photographs of Potsdamer Platz: once a vast no-man’s land in the heart of a city, it is now a public square, restored to its prewar status as one of Berlin’s busiest commercial hubs. The same goes for Checkpoint Charlie, the best-known crossing point between east and west during the cold war, a bleak, sinister place that reeked of spy fiction and skulduggery. Now it is just another tourist attraction, as schlocky and brash as Times Square.

Contrasts are bread and butter to Davies. In the 1980s, he conducted a photographic survey of the cotton industry in Greater Manchester and Lancashire, just as it was experiencing a steep decline. “Spectacular cotton-spinning mills, weaving sheds, dyeing and finishing buildings made to last for centuries were being demolished almost as quickly as I could photograph them,” he later wrote. In Berlin, the opposite occurred: a new city rose, phoenix-like, from the ashes of decline. Vacant lots were filled in, former wastelands plastered with new tower blocks and grand but crumbling 19th-century houses restored to their former grandeur.


Yet the Berlin cityscape also boasts some points of continuity. Several of Davies’s photographs are dominated by the vast, Nazi-era Detlev-Rohwedder-Haus on Wilhelmstrasse, a forbidding pile that once housed Hermann Göring’s ministry of aviation and is now home to the German finance ministry. The Berlin TV tower looms large throughout the series too: but its meaning has changed beyond all recognition. Built in 1969 as a national emblem of an overweening East German state, it has turned into one of the most abiding symbols of a unified Berlin.

There are absences too. Some of the capital’s most notorious buildings are now just empty spaces – above all, the old Gestapo headquarters, which in Davies’s 1984 pictures is a stretch of muddy scrubland. Yet, in the years after the wall came down, the cellars where political prisoners were tortured and killed were excavated, and now form part of a huge museum, Topographie des Terrors, detailing the history of Nazi state repression – clearly visible in Davies’s new images.

Looking at the pictures, one is reminded of a recent speech that Angela Merkel, Germany’s long-serving chancellor, gave to Harvard’s graduating class of 2019. In it, she described what it was like to live and work in the shadows of the Wall, which Davies so eloquently records in his work.

Merkel recalled her daily walk from work at the GDR Academy of Sciences in East Berlin to her nearby flat, which took her right up to the Wall. “Beyond it lay West Berlin, freedom,” she said. “And every day, whenever I came close to the Wall, I would have to turn away at the last moment, towards my flat. Every day, I would have to turn away from freedom.

“This Berlin Wall limited my opportunities,” she went on. “It quite literally stood in my way.” But then came 1989. And where a dark wall once stood, a “door suddenly opened”. “For me, too, the moment had come to step through it. No longer did I have to turn away from freedom at the last moment. I could cross this border and venture out into the great wide open.”

In 2019, Davies had the same feeling of a city opened up and a burden lifted. Before, the “presence of a military force” on the other side of the city was “palpable”, he says. Returning 35 years later, the Wall felt like “a distant memory of an unpleasant dream”. 

Guy Chazan is the FT’s Berlin bureau chief. “Retraced 81/19” by John Davies is published this month by GOST Books