

Hour is getting late to save Berlin watchtower

Germany

David Crossland - Berlin



The watchtower is sited next to the Bundesrat, which is being expanded

It once overlooked the Iron Curtain, with its concrete barriers, spikes and an electric fence to stop anyone trying to escape. Now the last watchtower of its kind along the Berlin Wall has also been enclosed by barbed wire and fenced off, as part of a modern construction project.

The tower was built in the late 1960s and was part of the modernisation of the 96-mile border fortifications round West Berlin. Tucked in a side street near Potsdamer Platz,

it offered border guards a clear view and field of fire down to the Brandenburg Gate, just over half a mile away.

The tower was open to the public for tours until 18 months ago but now stands behind a construction fence, and is about to disappear behind cladding for the duration of a project to enlarge the adjoining Bundesrat upper house of parliament. The Berlin city authority has rejected calls to move it a few hundred yards to a more prominent location, and it is unclear what will become of it.

A historian who helped preserve the tower said he feared it would be overshadowed by the new parliament building, which he said would be a disgraceful treatment of the city's Cold War legacy. "The wall belongs to the genes of the city of Berlin like the Eiffel Tower belongs to Paris," Jörg Moser-Metius, who restored the tower with private funds in 2010 and runs a new museum on the Berlin Wall, told *The Times*. He said the government had forgotten about the tower, which was destined to stand in front of an office window. "I find this disgraceful. This is a jewel of German history. True, it's not Neuschwanstein Castle but it's a building of tremendous importance for remembrance of this era and now it's rotting on a building site."

During the Cold War, the tower was manned around the clock by two guards with shoot-to-kill instructions for anyone trying to escape who didn't obey two calls to stop. At least 140 people died at the wall, according to the city's Berlin Wall Memorial organisation. Some estimates put the toll far higher.

"They had to stand in the cabin for eight hours. It was baking hot in summer and ice cold in winter," Moser-Metius said. The crews included members of the Stasi secret police and rotas were designed to prevent guards from being on duty together for long periods so they would not form friendships. They could climb a ladder on to the roof to get a clear shot but were more likely to climb down to tackle anyone trying to flee.

Berlin has long been accused of neglecting its Cold War history in the construction boom that followed the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989. The wall is almost absent today apart from a few short stretches, an open-air memorial and the one-mile East Side Gallery, which has been painted with murals. Lines of cobblestones mark its path through the centre of Berlin, and a cycle path has been opened along its route.

There has also been criticism of redevelopment plans for Checkpoint Charlie, the border crossing where the United States and Soviet Union confronted each other directly during the Cold War when they drew up tanks in a stand-off in October 1961, two months after West Berlin was cordoned off overnight. With its souvenir stalls and

replica US army border hut, the checkpoint has been criticised by locals as tacky.

The wall has now been gone longer than the 28 years it stood, and victims of the East German regime have said the hated structure and what it represented were being forgotten. The Rewe supermarket chain was accused this week of trivialising history by selling a range of groceries including “National People’s Army Field Soup”, emblazoned with the hammer and sickle emblem of the former German Democratic Republic.