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The Search for the One True Schießbefehl

**DDR-Schießbefehl [GDR Order to Fire] (c. 1962); original German text reprinted in**

**Bernhard Pollmann, ed., *Lesebuch zur deutschen Geschichte* [*German History***

***Reader*], vol. 3, *Vom deutschen Reich bis zur Gegenwart*[*From the German Reich to the Present*]. Dortmund, 1984, pp. 245-46.**

**Translation: Jeremiah Riemer**

**Narrative**

 The term “Schießbefehl” meaning “order to fire” was first used in the early 20th century. It gained popularity in the 1960s when used by the populace of East and West Germany to describe the German Democratic Republic’s order to fire on East German citizens fleeing from East to West Germany over the Berlin Wall (1961-1989). Due to the Schießbefehl, East German border guards were able to kill a number of people who attempted to escape over the wall. The exact number is difficult to pinpoint due to differences in what to include in the death tolls (border guards, suicidies, etc.) and a lack of transparency from the East German government about how many people were actually shot and killed. The number of deaths directly related to being shot at the wall has been estimated to be anywhere from 90 by the United States’ Central Intelligence Agency to 140 by Germany’s official Berlin tourism website.[[1]](#footnote-0) Between 1961 and 1982 there was no formal document declaring the Schießbefehl legal; it was given to border guards in various forms of instruction. It was formally written into law in the 1982 Grenzgesetze (Border Laws).[[2]](#footnote-1) My source is one of these various documents. This document is a translation of the 1962 GDR instructions on when it is appropriate to fire on civilians of East Germany attempting to flee the country. It was reprinted in West Germany in 1984 in a German reader by Bernhard Pollmann. In Pollmann’s book he states that the document is from August 17, 1962, but he does not mention where he got the document from or if the original copy still exists.

 My document is one of the many that historians and other researchers claim to be the one true order to fire. In reality there were multiple documents and other orders that were issued before the Border Laws of 1982 were established that legalized firing on fleeing East Germans. However, the mislabeling and misconception that there is a one true order to fire has made researching my document quite difficult because there are so many other versions in existence. For instance, there is a seven page Schießbefehl that was written in 1973 that was “discovered” in 2007 by major media outlets and hailed as the original Schießbefehl. While this document was the first written evidence that an order to fire existed, as Stasi officials had denied there ever was one, it was not the original Schießbefehl and this was not even the first time that this document had been discovered.

**Annotated Bibliography in Chronological Order**

1. “East German Border Guards Shoot and Kill an Italian,” *New York Times*, August 6, 1976,

https://www.nytimes.com/1976/08/06/archives/east-german-border-guards-shoot-and-kill -an-italian.html.

This article from the New York Times talks about the killings of people at the border between East and West Germany. This article discusses how an Italian citizen was shot at the border for trying to enter East Germany. They then go on to state how his death was “the latest in a series of border shootings.” The shootings at the border were so frequent that outside news sources started taking note, implying that there was a kill order in place. Additionally, as stated in the article, there was a procedure taken (firing a warning shot before fatally shooting), which shows that there were some sort of instructions out there for border guards to follow.

2. Bernhard Pollmann, ed., *Lesebuch zur deutschen Geschichte* [*German History Reader*], vol. 3,

*Vom deutschen Reich bis zur Gegenwart*[*From the German Reich to the Present*]. Dortmund, 1984, pp. 245-46.

This source is a German history reader that contains the 1962 Schießbefehl that was translated on GHDI. This Schießbefehl contains GDR instructions on when it is appropriate to fire on civilians of East Germany attempting to flee the country.

3. Rudolf Riemer: *Das zweigeteilte Deutschland 1961–1962.* München 1995, S. 115 ff.

This source describes East and West Germany in 1961 and 1962. It also contains Order No. 39/60 of 28 June 1960 from the Minister of the Interior of East Germany which loosened the previously restrictive rules on the use of firearms at the border. It now allowed for the use of firearms on “spies, saboteurs, provocateurs and other criminals if they oppose arrest, offer armed resistance, or take flight”.[[3]](#footnote-2) This book is not available in any of the UC Libraries, but this small section and quote are accessible through Wikipedia.

4. “East German ‘license to kill’ found,” *BBC News,* August 12, 2007,

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/6943093.stm>.

This BBC News article discusses the discovery of the first written proof that a Schießbefehl existed. It states that the October 1, 1973 document was found in “the regional archive office in the eastern city of Magdeburg,” and was unsigned.

5. Judy Dempsey, “East German Shoot-to-kill Order is Found,” *New York Times*, August 13,

2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/13/world/europe/13germany.html>.

This article from the New York Times also discusses the discovery of the 1973 Schießbefehl- showing how significant this discovery was on an international level. Within the article, Dempsey states that 270 plus people were killed by border guards because of the Schießbefehl and reiterates that this was the first written proof East German officials authorized lethal force at the wall.

6. Siegfried Suckut, “Ein Mannheimer gilt als Vater des Schießbefehls an der DDR-Grenze,”

*Mannheimer Morgen*, November 26, 2010.

This news article from the Mannheimer Morgen discusses the life of Heinz Hoffmann, the former Minister of National Defense in the GDR. Hoffman was the Minister of defense from 1960 to 1985, and according to this article “Vielen galt er seitdem als Urheber des Schießbefehls” or loosely translated, “many considered him to be the father of the shooting order.”

7. National Archives and Records Administration. “A City Divided: Life and Death in the

Shadow of the Wall.” October 16, 2013.

<https://www.archives.gov/files/research/foreign-policy/cold-war/berlin-wall-1962-1987/publication.pdf>.

This source from the U.S. National Archives contains information about the “legalization” of the shoot to kill order. It states that from 1962 onward there were documents and other instructions given to border guards in East Germany on when to shoot fleeing East German citizens. There was no formal legalization or law authorizing this action until 1982, when new border laws were passed.

8. Jim Willis. *Daily Life Behind the Iron Curtain.* Santa Barbara: *ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2014.*

Willis’ book is about life in Eastern Europe during the time of the Berlin Wall. It is related to the Schießbefehl because within it he notes how the Stasi denied the existence of a Schießbefehl for years. The discovery of the 1973 shoot to kill order was the first written proof that one did exist. However, he goes on to state that the alleged “discovery” of the shoot to kill order in 2007, was actually discovered 10 years earlier by researchers.

1. 90 deaths: “A City Divided: Life and Death in the Shadow of the Wall,” National Archives and Records Administration, accessed May 21, 2019, <https://www.archives.gov/files/research/foreign-policy/cold-war/berlin-wall-1962-1987/publication.pdf>.

140 deaths: “Victims of the Wall,” Berlin.de, accessed June 5, 2019, https://www.berlin.de/mauer/en/history/victims-of-the-wall/. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. “A City Divided: Life and Death in the Shadow of the Wall,” National Archives and Records Administration, accessed May 21, 2019, <https://www.archives.gov/files/research/foreign-policy/cold-war/berlin-wall-1962-1987/publication.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. “Schießbefehl,” Wikipedia, accessed May 20, 2019, <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schie%C3%9Fbefehl#cite_ref-2>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)