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Two Germanys, Two Narratives: The Death of Roland Hoff at the Berlin Wall

G. Sch., “Gestern an der Zonengrenze: SED-Scherge erschöß Flüchtling im Teltowkanal” [“Yesterday at the Zonal Border: SED-Henchman Shot Fleeing Man in the Teltow Canal”], *Tagesspiegel*, August 30, 1961.

https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=826

This source, found in the GHDI collection under the “Two Germanies: The Shadow of the Wall” section, was written by a *Tagesspiegel* journalist with the initials “G. Sch.” I was having trouble finding the full identity of the author, so I turned to AI as a resource (Prompt: “Who is the author of G. Sch., “Gestern an der Zonengrenze: SED-Scherge erschöß Flüchtling im Teltowkanal” [“Yesterday at the Zonal Border: SED-Henchman Shot Fleeing Man in the Teltow Canal”], *Tagesspiegel*, August 30, 1961.”). I was informed that without access to the *Tagesspiegel* archives, the identity of the journalist remains unknown.¹ *Der Tagesspiegel* is a daily newspaper in West Berlin that was established in 1945.² The event in question is set in the context of Germany’s division with the Berlin Wall. The document details the attempted escape of an eastern Berliner, who tried to cross to the western side by way of the Teltow Canal but was instead shot dead.³ The source was created to report on the event and perhaps served as propaganda against East Berlin and its Wall. A stark contrast in perspectives can be noted between the East and West German sides with respect to the death of this escapee.

A refugee, from the eastern side of the Berlin Wall, attempted to escape by swimming across the canal to the Western side. The man hung a briefcase with a cord around his neck, and he then plunged into the waters. The sound of the man’s splash as he jumped into the canal alerted eastern guards of his presence, and they began to shoot. Almost halfway across, the refugee was shot in the head by a man from the Factory Combat Group. A witness on the eastern side spoke out against the murder as it happened, and he was immediately surrounded and taken

¹ ChatGPT

² “Der Tagesspiegel,” *Wikipedia*, last modified October 14, 2024.

³ G. Sch., “Gestern an der Zonengrenze: SED-Scherge erschöß Flüchtling im Teltowkanal” [“Yesterday at the Zonal Border: SED-Henchman Shot Fleeing Man in the Teltow Canal”], *Tagesspiegel*, August 30, 1961.

away by the authorities of East Berlin. According to the report, the man who shot the refugee was deemed a hero by officers and Eastern journalists. Though Berliners searched from East and West, the body of the escapee, then unidentified, was not found.⁴

Further research can be used to build upon the information provided in the GHDI document. Through a Wikipedia list of deaths associated with the Berlin Wall, the identity of the victim, previously unknown when the original story was published, can be found. Roland Hoff died on August 29, 1961, at the age of 27, the third death to occur on the long list to follow.⁵ This information was derived from yet another source, which Wikipedia cites in the article's footnotes. This source, by Christine Brecht, supplies more information on the victim, including his birth on March 19, 1934, in Hanover, where he spent his childhood with his three sisters. Brecht provides insight into the events leading up to Roland Hoff's death, explaining how he ignored court summons after speaking out against the closure of the Berlin border.⁶ Her work provides insight into the situation at hand. ChatGPT (Prompt: "The author (Christine Brecht) includes a list of footnotes at the bottom citing the 14 sources she used to find her information. Where did she get her information? Did she get Roland Hoff's file after the fall of East Germany?") explains that Brecht draws from various contemporary newspaper articles, official records, and files from the Ministry for State Security to supplement her work. Brecht's inclusion of files from the Ministry for State Security, also known as the Stasi, indicates that Brecht accessed these documents after the fall of East Germany in 1990. As the Stasi Records Archive was established at this time, such resources were made accessible to the public.⁷

Looking at the interview of one of the East German escapees, conclusions can be drawn on the frequency of escape attempts by way of the Teltow Canal. The interview details the successful crossing of Manfred Wenzel from the eastern bank of the canal to the west. Like Roland Hoff, Wenzel had nothing but a briefcase. Unlike Hoff, Wenzel made it to the other side.⁸ Swimming across the canal just days before Roland Hoff's attempted escape,⁹ Manfred Wenzel's success, and others like it, likely contributed to Hoff's decision to brace the waters in hopes of

⁴ G. Sch., "Gestern an der Zonengrenze," *Tagesspiegel*, August 30, 1961.

⁵ "List of Deaths at the Berlin Wall," *Wikipedia*, August 23, 2011.

⁶ Christine Brecht, "Roland Hoff," *Berlin Wall Memorial | The Berlin Wall | Fatalities | 1961*, November 7, 2017.

⁷ ChatGPT

⁸ "Escaping across the Water - History of the Berlin Wall and Its Fall," *History of the Berlin Wall and Its Fall Visualized with Videos and Images*, rbb, 2011.

⁹ "Escaping across the Water," *History of the Berlin Wall*, rbb, 2011.

achieving a similar outcome. Wenzel escaped on August 13, 1961,¹⁰ the same day the German Democratic Republic closed the border between East and West Berlin.¹¹ A Wikipedia article on Roland Hoff provides this information, situating Hoff's death in the context of the German division.

The Wikipedia article dedicated to Roland Hoff also introduces developments that unfolded after the Teltow Canal incident. Wanted posters were posted along the border following Roland Hoff's death, imploring witnesses to come forward with any information that could be used in identifying the guards responsible for the murder. Further research leads to a source that includes a photograph of a wanted poster, similarly offering a reward to anyone possessing information that could be used to identify persons connected to the Teltow Canal killing.¹² Thanks to information provided by a defector, three of the shooters were brought to court after the fall of the Wall.¹³ Though the men were brought before the court, the trials remained inconclusive, as the courts could not discern which man was responsible for the fatal shot to Hoff's head.¹⁴ The evident desire for justice surrounding Roland Hoff's death by West Germans reveals the opposing perspectives held by Eastern and Western Germans on the situation. West Germans viewed Hoff's death as murder. In contrast, as detailed by the original news story, the murderer was honored and congratulated on the eastern side.¹⁵

This theme continues with the inclusion of Hoff's memorial stones in the same article where the image of the wanted poster is found. The West Germans created the two memorial stones to commemorate the then-unidentified victim of the German Democratic Republic.¹⁶ Though these assumptions cannot be employed to describe the feelings of all Germans, the governmental authorities in charge on both sides of the border strongly suggest these trends. The GDR celebrated Roland Hoff's failed escape; the Federal Republic of Germany mourned. Additional support on how the East German government viewed the death of Roland Hoff is demonstrated through the German Democratic Republic's order to fire, found in the GHDI collection. Though border service members were shooting would-be escapees prior to this notice,

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ "Roland Hoff," *Wikipedia*, August 23, 2006.

¹² Bundeszentrale für politische. "Roland Hoff." *Hoff, Roland | Chronicle of the Wall*.

¹³ "Roland Hoff," *Wikipedia*.

¹⁴ Bundeszentrale, "Roland Hoff."

¹⁵ G. Sch., "Gestern an der Zonengrenze," *Tagesspiegel*, August 30, 1961.

¹⁶ Bundeszentrale, "Roland Hoff."

the order justified the murders related to the Berlin border escapes. With this order, GDR guards were granted permission by their superiors to shoot,¹⁷ showcasing the support and even commemoration shown by the GDR government towards such behaviors.

I selected this source out of interest in the Berlin Wall. My grandfather was a United States Army officer stationed in West Berlin from April of 1971 through September of 1973, making the subject personal to me. Upon talking to him about his experiences, my grandfather shared that he flew over the border once with a pilot friend of his. He noted how interesting it was that the East German government was more concerned with keeping its people in than keeping the Americans out. I found this reflective of the desire of many East German citizens to escape to the West. If the GDR's closure of the borders was causing East Berlin escapees to feel trapped, it is no wonder that these individuals sought to leave East Germany. The source reporting on the death of Roland Hoff is revealing of the overarching political context taking place in Berlin at the time of the border closure. It provides insight into the perspectives held by Germans, focusing specifically on Roland Hoff's failed swim across the Teltow Canal. Various sources can be used to build upon the newspaper article, creating an enhanced understanding of the event and what Roland Hoff's death meant for the tense dynamics between East and West Germany.

¹⁷ Chronik Verlag, "GDR Order to Fire on Would-Be Escapees (c. 1962)," *German History in Documents and Images* (GHDI), 2003.

Annotated Bibliography in Chronological Order

Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung. “Roland Hoff.” Hoff, Roland | Chronicle of the Wall, 2001. <https://www.chronik-der-mauer.de/en/victims/180481/hoff-roland>.

This site features images closely associated with Roland Hoff’s failed escape from East Germany. A photo of Roland Hoff’s memorial stone, the first image to appear, includes an inscription, which reads “At this spot, on August 29, 1961, a German was shot while seeking the path to freedom.” This message eliminates the criminal status associated with escapees in the German Democratic Republic and raises them to a place of honor in the West. The site includes another source to expand on material related to the event. Unveiled on the first anniversary of his death, a second photograph features yet another memorial stone, reading “To the Unknown Victims of Terror.” Thirdly, a copy of a wanted poster can be found on the site, offering a reward to anyone possessing information that could be used to identify persons connected to the Teltow Canal killing. Though all of the text in the original images is in German, AI was constructive in efficiently translating the material into English...¹⁸

Prompt 1: “<https://www.chronik-der-mauer.de/en/victims/180481/hoff-roland?type=galerie&show=image&i=177996>...can you translate this to English?”

Prompt 2: “<https://www.chronik-der-mauer.de/en/victims/180481/hoff-roland?type=galerie&show=image&i=177995>...translate the words in this image.”

Prompt 3: “<https://www.chronik-der-mauer.de/en/victims/180481/hoff-roland?type=galerie&show=image&i=177997>...can you translate this from German to English?”

The images, exhibiting material created in the wake of the event, provide insight into the West German perspective, revealing how some Western Germans viewed the situation.

Verlag, Chronik. “GDR Order to Fire on Would-Be Escapees (c. 1962).” GHDI, 2003. https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=37.

The document lays out the official order to fire on East Germans attempting to escape to West Berlin, instated in the German Democratic Republic in 1962. Though border service members were shooting would-be escapees prior to this notice, the order justified the murders related to Berlin border escapes. With this order, GDR guards were granted

¹⁸ ChatGPT

permission by their superiors to shoot, showcasing the support and even commemoration shown by the GDR government towards such behaviors. The order to fire was released the year following the death of Roland Hoff, situating it in the context of the event in question.

“Roland Hoff.” Wikipedia, August 23, 2006. https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roland_Hoff.

The Wikipedia article is centered on Berlin Wall victim Roland Hoff. Setting Hoff’s death in the context of the Berlin Wall construction, the article notes that the border between West Berlin and the GDR was closed just sixteen days prior to his attempted escape across the Teltow Canal. The article provides details following the event, namely the posting of wanted posters along the border which sought to gather information on the guards responsible for Hoff’s death. Thanks to information provided by a defector, three of the shooters were brought to court after the fall of the Wall, unveiling the desire for justice among West Berliners when looking at the Berlin Wall deaths. Another source reveals that there was no resolution to the trials, as the court could not determine who had fired the fatal shot.¹⁹ Google Translate successfully translated the article from its original German into the English language.

“List of Deaths at the Berlin Wall.” Wikipedia, August 23, 2011.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_deaths_at_the_Berlin_Wall.

The article provides a list of victims connected to the Berlin Wall, including the dates on which the individuals died. Through this source, I discovered the identity of the Teltow Canal victim. By looking at the date of the GHDI document, the unidentified escapee of the event could be pinpointed from the long list of Berlin Wall victims. The footnotes provided further direction in research, leading to work by Christine Brecht, another source that supplemented substantial information on the victim.

“Escaping across the Water - History of the Berlin Wall and Its Fall.” History of the Berlin Wall and Its Fall Visualized with Videos and Images. rbb, 2011. <https://www.the-berlin-wall.com/videos/berlin-contemporary-witness-escaping-across-the-water-811/>.

This source contains an interview with an East Berliner who successfully escaped to West Berlin on August 13, 1961, by way of the Teltow Canal. The escapee, Manfred Wenzel, swam across the canal with nothing but a briefcase. A couple assisted him once he

¹⁹ Bundeszentrale, “Roland Hoff.”

reached the western bank and directed him to the police station. Wenzel then details the challenge of smuggling his wife and children across the border, which he was able to achieve a year later. Swimming across the canal just days before Roland Hoff's attempted escape, Manfred Wenzel's success may have contributed to Hoff's decision to brace the waters in hopes of achieving a similar outcome.

Brecht, Christine. "Roland Hoff." Berlin Wall Memorial | The Berlin Wall | Fatalities | 1961, November 7, 2017. <https://web.archive.org/web/20171107055115/http://www.berliner-mauer-gedenkstaette.de/en/1961-299,333,2.html>.

The author of the source, Christine Brecht, provides background information on the victim of the Teltow Canal killing on August 29, 1961. This retelling of the event includes Roland Hoff's birthplace and birthdate, as well as his status as the only son and favorite child of his mother alongside three sisters. Prior to his attempted escape, Hoff ignored summons to court to address his open discontent with the Berlin Wall. Brecht cites G. Sch.'s original source from GHDI when sharing her work, using it in her compilation while also adding to her piece with other source material. These additional sources are identifiable through the hyperlink above. Brecht gathered her information from official records, archival documents, and newspaper articles, which are listed in the footnotes of website where Brecht published her work.

"Der Tagesspiegel." Wikipedia. Last modified October 14, 2024.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Der_Tagesspiegel.

This source provides a definition of *Der Tagesspiegel*, which the Wikipedia article presents as a news source read by West Berliners. *Der Tagesspiegel* published the original article on Roland Hoff, revealing its significance to this paper. From this source, it is gathered that the newspaper was founded in 1945. This information is useful in providing background on *Der Tagesspiegel* and situating the newspaper in the overall context of the paper.