This paper draws on the BBC monitoring reports of radio stations in the West and East to examine how the building of the Berlin Wall was discursively constructed in the weeks leading up to the overnight closure of the inner city frontier on 13 August 1961. It draws specifically on files relating to broadcasts from both East and West Germany over the summer months to see how the closure of the frontier hung in the airwaves.

Background

Of course the story of the postwar division of Germany and its capital Berlin into 4 zones is very well known, as is the fact that there had been growing tension and repeated flashpoints as the Cold War set in, from the Soviet blockade of the Western sectors of Berlin and the Berlin Airlift in 1948 that saw the end of the joint administration and led to the foundation in 1949 of the two German states. East Berlin remained as capital of the German Democratic Republic, while the capital of the Federal Republic moved to Bonn, leaving West Berlin formally to remain a territory under Allied supervision, but with open borders to the East. In May 1953 the border was closed between East and West Germany, but not between the two halves of Berlin. Five years later, Kruschchev claimed that Bonn had ‘erected a wall between the two parts of Germany’ (Wilke, p.149) and delivered his Berlin Ultimatum, demanding the withdrawal of Western troops from West Berlin so that Berlin could become a ‘free city’ in a move towards a confederation of the two Germanies.

In June 1961 Kruschchev and Kennedy met in Vienna, but made no progress over the ‘Berlin question’, and in July Kennedy made a TV address in which he re-asserted the Western allies’ rights to remain in, and have access to, West Berlin, and for West Berliners to have the right of self-determination.

During a June press conference, Ulbricht had notoriously declared, ‘Niemand hat die Absicht, eine Mauer zu errichten’ (No-one has the intention to build a wall), but the BBCM transcripts reveal that he repeated this apparent assurance on the airwaves less than a fortnight before construction of the wall began in an interview with an Evening Standard correspondent (probably recorded on 31 July), albeit this time with a notable qualification:
The reporter then gives Mr Ulbricht another chance to answer the question:

[East Germany Deutschlandsender 2.8.61
Interview with the Evening Standard
BBCM EE.C.16 – East Germany (D'Sender), July–August 1961]

This indicates that Ulbricht’s infamous utterance at the June press conference was not an isolated or accidental response to a journalist's question, but was a consistent line that was repeated in the weeks leading up to the closing of the frontier. It is also interesting to note, however, that he does seem to let slip that the assurance is conditional on the actions of the West. This would surely only have fuelled the speculations about the possible sealing of the
borders that were circulating throughout the summer of 1961, despite ostensibly being an attempt to dampen such speculation.

This is particularly striking in light of a transcript (which came to light in 2009)\(^1\) of a phone call the day before, on 1 August 1961, between Kruschchev and Ulbricht, which reveals not only that the plans for the closing of the borders were already confirmed at the point of this particular public denial (Kruschchev talks of placing ‘an iron ring’ around West Berlin), but that the media strategy was already taking shape alongside the plans for the requisition of barbed wire and personnel.

The transcript of the telephone conversation makes it quite clear that the idea of closing the border was driven by economic concerns (a combination of a poor harvest, the problems of the collectivisation programme, the shortage of consumer goods and, not least, the growing number of East Germans moving to the West), but that Ulbricht wanted to present it to the people as answering a political request from the other socialist countries in the face of a belligerent West infiltrating the East with spies. In fact Ulbricht refers to his response to the ‘English journalist’ the day before – that the responsibility lay with the West – and Krushchev commends his answer, saying, ‘I see that we correctly understand each other on this issue.’

Certainly this media strategy of highlighting the political context for the closure of the borders is reflected in the reports as captured in the BBC Monitoring files, as I will show below.

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\(^1\) W. Ulbricht: We have already begun the fight against trade in people [Menschenhandel, as the East German leaders referred to West Berlin and West German advertising campaigns for jobs, which particularly lured skilled workers away from the GDR]. The enemy feels that we are preparing to close the border. Yesterday for example an English correspondent asked me: Will you close the border today? I said that it depends on the Western powers.

N. S. Khrushchev: I see that we correctly understand each other on this issue.

The radio landscape

But first, it is worth sketching out the particularly complex radio landscape in and around Berlin at this moment. Of course, the first thing to say is that there was a great deal of attention to the propaganda of the airwaves on both sides as it was relatively easy to listen in across borders, with no technological nor linguistic barriers. In 1961, Ulbricht described the situation as, ‘the class enemy […] sitting on the roof’, in reference to East German aerials pointed to the West (Marks, 1983: 50)

There were certainly plenty of stations competing for the attention of the listening public in Berlin. On the Western side, there was RIAS (Radio im amerikanischen Sektor), Sender Freies Berlin (funded by the US), and by 1962, Deutschlandfunk which was a West German external service directed specifically at East Germans. There was also the BBC German programme (cf. Major, 2013), Radio Free Europe, and the forces networks of the occupying powers, most notably BFBS and AFN.

On the Eastern side there was the Berliner Rundfunk and the Berliner Welle, and, since 1955, Radio Berlin International. As in the West, there were plenty of stations directed to the listeners outside the GDR, too. There was the Deutschlandsender, which became Stimme der DDR (Voice of the GDR), the Deutscher Freiheitssender 904, (1956–1971) which targeted members of the outlawed West German communist party in code, the Deutscher Soldatensender 935, which targeted West German soldiers, and an offshoot of the Berliner Welle, which began broadcasting in English on one of its frequencies on 26 August 1961. This so-called ‘Out-post station’, or ‘Ops’, targeted US soldiers in West Berlin by playing the same music as AFN, which made it popular with East Berliners as well. Its sign-off song at this time, not incidentally, was the Cole Porter song, ‘Don't Fence Me In’ (Marks, 1983: 50).

Now the BBCM files for this period transcribe only a few of these stations, and of course they focus only on the political content, but they do bring to life the very stark ideological divide that preceded the building of the Wall in the summer of 1961. The issue that dominated the crisis was what came to be called Republikflucht, ‘the flight from the Republic’, as East Germans migrated across the open border in their hundreds of thousands, a huge economic and ideological problem for the East.
Reporting *Republikflucht*

In the weeks before 13 August, the Western radio almost daily seems to have highlighted the decision of high profile East Berliners to defect to the West, describing them as ‘refugees’ who were ‘fleeing’ or ‘escaping’:

...‘one of the leading scientists...has fled to the Federal Republic...’

[BBBM W24: DPA 17.7.61, 13.20]

...‘the chief physician of East Berlin People's Police Hospital escaped to West Berlin yesterday with his family' in his official car to Marienfelde emergency reception camp having 'lately been exposed to unbearable pressure.'

[BBBM W24: DPA 2.8.61, 13.33]

The focus here is clearly on the stories of named individuals whose high ranking status in the East simply underscores for the listeners the draw of the West over the East. There is a mix of reporting strategies to maximise the propaganda value – the matter-of-fact daily repetition of individual stories alternating with language chosen to dramatise the situation.

Certainly the reports from the East knew how to dramatise, too, although here the techniques ranged from highlighting the role of espionage and criminality on the part of the West in ever more colourful language, to simply denying that there was a problem. In the interview cited
above, Wilson asks Ulbricht what he thinks of the migration, reported to be reaching 1,000 people a day. The language Ulbricht uses suddenly shifts in tone:

"These figures are part of the psychological warfare against the GDR. The migration of GDR citizens has been, due to for many years past, not just a migration or emigration one reason or another, but an integral part of the Cold War. Engaged in trafficking in human beings, of psychological warfare and sabotage directed against the GDR. This is no political migration, but filthy trafficking in human beings, conducted with despicable means, in which the West German authorities, the West German monopoly capitalists and also the US agents' centres - most of which are working from West Berlin - have invested large sums of money. Since large pensions have been settled on many former Nazis in West Germany while here in the GDR they have to earn a living by honest work of many politically incriminated persons also go to the West. The organisation engaged in trade in human beings (do not shrink from) criminal methods such as blackmail, coercion and even forcible abduction (a few words indistinct). If you so desire, our press office can certainly furnish plenty of evidence for you."

[East Germany Deutschlandsender 3.8.61 Interview with the Evening Standard BBCM EE.C.16 – East Germany (D'Sender), July–August 1961]

This propaganda line about kidnapping is taken up and reinforced the following day (3 August) in a commentary by Wolfgang Dost [sic] at 18.42:
The broadcast ended with an appeal to West German listeners to help have the kidnappers apprehended and to see to it along with the GDR that West Berlin should become a free city, free from secret service HQs and slave traders and kidnappers.

Reports on 13 August 1961

Turning to the reports from 13 August itself, of course there are stark differences.

The East

The East German transmitters repeatedly carried the ‘Declaration of the Warsaw Pact States’ (first broadcast at 4am on Berliner Rundfunk). The key themes were that the peaceful initiatives of the GDR had met with only a warmongering response from the West, including the penetration of the GDR with spies, which had provoked the need for ‘protective measures at the borders’. There were also repeated descriptions of the new restrictions on travel and how they would be enforced. There were lots of unscheduled news-led broadcasts on Berliner Rundfunk, but also some ‘aktuelle’ political satires. There was also more musical output than had been planned – mostly soothing modern jazz, but also music from Germany and its ‘fraternal states’, and by ‘the revolutionary working class’. A request programme for GDR forces ran through the night.

2 For more information about the schedules on the day, and for audio clips, see The German Radio Archive: http://1961.dra.de/index.php?id=29
The BBCM transcripts give access to the political commentaries that were broadcast in the early evening, for example, from Hermann Ley, the First Chairman of the State Radio Committee:

Commentary by Prof. Dr. Hermann Ley, First Chairman of the State Radio Committee, 13.8.61, 18.15
BBCM EE.C.17 – Eastern Germany in German, August–September 1961

The triumphalism is palpable, exaggerated by the dismissiveness of the opposition. He went on to say,

The action has taken place noiselessly. All of us however are glad now at long last that we have created order and calm.

That message of how quietly and calmly the situation had been resolved was a repeated theme over the next days and weeks in the attempt to show that Democratic Berlin was ‘living a calm life of labour’ where the people were in support of the ‘measures’ taken.

Here is one short extract from 14 August, which both exemplifies this presentation of the calm acceptance of the new reality, while also being a striking example of the vilification and ‘othering’ of the West, in this case as rats and as a tumour:
Commentary on Deutschlandsender by Rudi Ruditsch, 18.42 on 14.8.61
BBCM EE.C.17 – Eastern Germany in German, August–September 1961

The West:
Where 13 August had begun on Eastern airwaves with formal declarations, the radio in the West was much more about on-the-spot reporting as the day unfolded.

The first report of the border closure came in a newsflash at 10.20 in the morning:

[DPA East German, 10.20 on 13.8.61
BBCM W24 – West Germany (DPA), July–August 1961]

The report is very descriptive of localised events, detailing where police and soldiers were stationed, where Soviet tents had been erected and tanks deployed etc. There were also descriptions of holes being dug at the border, and barbed wire being used to block S-Bahn routes. The report privileges witness accounts, using phrases like, ‘according to railwaymen’; ‘a passerby reported to police that tanks had been drawn up on the Alexanderplatz’; ‘East
Berlin citizens who stood this morning at the sector boundary and were able to talk to West Berliners were suddenly driven back by the People’s Police.

This continues in the next reported bulletin at 13.20:

….a number of travellers…reported that armoured vehicles carrying infantry are moving…towards the capital...

There are also reports of violence that contrast dramatically with the description of calm propounded in the East Berlin commentaries. At 15.45 it was reported that a West Berliner had been bayonetted in the knee by a Volkspolizist; that West Berliners taking up a ‘menacing attitude’ towards the Volkspolizei had been moved away by the West Berlin police; at 21.49 that East Berlin frontier guards used tear gas and smoke bombs against 300 young West Berliners who had advanced to the barbed wire, taking one protester across to the East as a crowd of 2500 watched, held back by West Berlin police. There were also reports of continuing migration, as in this report, replete with individual drama, carried at 21.49:

‘Carrying his 3 year old child on his back and accompanied by his wife and two young men, a refugee this afternoon swam across the Teltow canal from the Soviet side to West Berlin’.

DPA West Germany 21.49 on 13.8.61
BBCM W24 – West Germany (DPA), July–August 1961

As in the East, by the evening there were political commentaries on the situation. By 18.30 the radio was reporting on Mayor Willi Brandt’s response, which described the GDR’s action as a breach of international law, a violation of the UN Declaration of Human Rights, and nothing short of the annexation of East Berlin which was under Four Power administration. He also described the already severe impact on flow of refugees: from 3090 the day before to 800 today (DPA corrected this to say few of the 800 had come from the Eastern zone). He also talked of the ‘fellowship’ of West Berlin and the Federal Republic, of ‘German self-determination’ and of ‘world peace’.

One thing to say at this point is that the border construction clearly was not yet a wall. Indeed, the language used to describe both the physical construction and the political border was very fluid. Already in the last few extracts, there are sector boundaries, frontiers, zonal barriers, sides, and there are descriptions of sealing, closing, cordoning off by way of barbed wire, barricades, holes and ditches, police, military, guns and tanks. This fluidity of language is a product of the diplomatic shadow-fighting, but also the sheer living uncertainty of the situation. It is striking now how often the word ‘temporary’ is used, and of course neither side could know that this would be the beginning of a 28 year long story. The first time I came across the
Over the next few weeks, there were continued reports of protests and other forms of resistance; of the gradual extension and strengthening of the barricades. There were also long reports of the many successful escapes — and of the unsuccessful, including the initiation of the policy to shoot to kill. There were also of course numerous justifications and accusations from politicians and other commentators on both sides — rich material for rhetorical analysis, not least in the various invocations of historical lessons that were in circulation, but beyond the scope of this short paper. However, a couple of examples can provide some flavor of the potent language used, particularly in the East to justify the building of the wall via different metaphors, including the presentation of West Berlin as a lunatic asylum:

"Dangerous lunatics, it will be remembered, have to be put into a padded cell so that they can do no harm to those around them. We have lately done something similar to some politicians whom we have had to eject from the building of West Berlin or who wanted to use West Berlin for their own purposes. We have put them behind lock and key, as it were. ... Our measures, as proved by the facts, are not directed against the people of West Berlin. Nevertheless we are hoping that they, too, will look on them as a lesson teaching them that they must not allow themselves to be infected by these mad ranters for war, whose further activities we have now prevented. (Passage omitted) We have acted in the interest of our whole people, especially of the West Berlin population, and for the security of the citizens of our Republic."

and the West as squatters in the East German home:
The speaker in this latter example, Karl-Eduard von Schnitzler, was to become very well known on East German radio and television for ‘Der Schwarze Kanal’ (The Black Channel), the programme which offered its listeners the ideologically correct critique of the West German media that they were exposed to coming over the airwaves from West Berlin and beyond. And it is these radio wars that I want to come to by way of conclusion.

**Cold Radio Wars**

Clearly everyone – politicians, media practitioners and members of both states – knew that the border could never be sealed in the airwaves.

There was an attempt a few days after the wall went up to get FDJ (East Germany’s Free German Youth organisation) members to physically turn people’s aerials and antennae away from the West; and there were later attempts to restrict receivers to East German wavelengths, but none of these policies was remotely successful.

The radio wars were clearly in evidence in the radio texts themselves. On the evening of 13 August, for example, Radio GDR carried a commentary by Manfred Klein, who reported that ‘I have just come back from the Brandenburg Gate, which has been temporarily closed since 14.00 as a crossing point from West Berlin to Democratic Berlin’.
He goes on to say that the West Berlin senate was so scared that,

...they forgot to tug the rope of the so-called Liberty ding-dong...

which I only mention here because it is such a funny turn of phrase, and makes me wonder about the translation...

Willi Brandt’s speech at the opening of the Funkausstellung (Broadcasting Show) on 28 August, was widely reported. He urged broadcasters to remain aware of the responsibility of being a bridge to brothers in the zone and in East Berlin; the responsibility in this respect was even greater than hitherto. Radio and Television should transmit as much as possible of ‘what links us in the sphere of the mind’ [BBCM W21 – West Germany (DPA), August–September 1961].

But of course the East German authorities were also aware of the free for all in the ether, and broadcast refutations in various forms – many implicit, others, like this example broadcast on the Deutschlandsender on 21 September, at 5pm, more explicit:

The West Berlin gutter press has reported about mass deportations on the sector boundary; our reporter Joachim Liebschitz? went to find out:
Meanwhile in the West, of course, very different stories came to the microphone. One Volkspolizist who had fled to the West, was reported to have,

appealed to all armed units in East Germany not to fire on refugees when on duty at the Berlin barrier of the zonal frontier. He suggested the Soviet zone soldiers and People’s policemen should be told by loudspeaker across the sector boundary that if they fled to West Berlin they would find freedom and not persecution as the SED regime alleged.

And this is a reminder that the radio wars were not the only use of soundwaves for propaganda – knowing the limitations of radio in terms of ensuring people listened to the right stuff, there were plenty of instances of loudspeakers drawn up to the boundary to transmit directly into the other side’s soundscape.

**Value of the BBCM archives**

According to the German Radio Archive, rather little of the broadcast output from August 1961 survives. The GDR did not always keep recordings, and even when combined with recordings kept by RIAS, the surviving record is only partial, even for political material.

The BBCM transcripts, particularly of broadcasts rather than press agency reports, both go some way to fill in the gaps, and, more importantly, give more direct access to the events as unfolding, as urgent, as undetermined, and as unsettling. The differences in both style and ideology between the two sides do not come as any surprise, but there is something nevertheless revealing about ‘hearing’, albeit at one remove, the first draft of history.

Of course the key themes are already identified in the histories, but the transcripts give a real insight into the degree of repetition of these themes, and also the variety of detail within each theme. Broadcasts in the West are all about the ‘flight’ from the privations of communism to liberty. Broadcasts in the East are all about the bellicose West, its militarisation, its revanchism, its espionage, its refusal to work towards a German peace treaty, its role as
inheritor of the fascist past. Both make repeated albeit diametrically opposed reference to the treaties and protocols of the unsettled post-war ‘settlement’.

Of course, when I say that this hearing is at one remove, that is significant – there is more to a radio broadcast than the words alone. The microphone can be a witness to events, and some field recordings do survive.\(^3\) There is also a set of recordings of East German radio in the summer of 1961 made by an editor at SFB that was bequeathed to the German Radio Archive in 2011, on the 50th anniversary of the building of the Wall. Snippets are available to hear online. Listening to those recordings that match up with the transcripts, I was surprised that the words that often come across as hectoring propaganda on the page, seem to have been delivered in reasonable-sounding tones. Having said that, this does resonate with an argument I have made before in relation to Nazi propaganda – that the dominant received version of propaganda as impassioned and strident speeches full of overblown rhetoric, delivered at carefully orchestrated mass rallies was actually not the experience of everyday broadcasting, which had learned the lesson of conforming to the communicative conditions of reception in the private sphere – in other words, people were listening in their homes, and broadcasters had long since learned to domesticate their public speech (Lacey, 1997).

Given this, it is perhaps surprising that the transcripts – or at least those I have seen – do not ever seem to make any comment on the style of delivery or the tone of voice, or indeed any other non-verbalised parts of the broadcast. There are instances where comments are made about gaps in the transcription record due to ‘recording mishaps’ or ‘poor’ or ‘worthless’ reception, but these are the only traces of the texts as spoken, as sounded, as designed for the listening ear and not the reading eye.

These limitations notwithstanding, the BBCM transcripts are clearly an invaluable resource for historians interested in the hour by hour unfolding of public history.

**References**


\(^3\) cf. recording of sounds of construction of the wall, on 13\(^{th}\) August: [http://www.chronik-der-mauer.de/chronik/?month=8&year=1961&opennid=174849&moc=1#anchornid174849](http://www.chronik-der-mauer.de/chronik/?month=8&year=1961&opennid=174849&moc=1#anchornid174849)

**Webography**

http://www.chronik-der-mauer.de

http://1961.dra.de (Der Mauerbau 1961 im Hörfunk und Fernsehen der DDR)