One of the drivers recalled that the silence was the most terrifying thing. When the bus drove between the walls, nothing could be heard apart from the roar of the engine. They knew that East German border guards were watching their faces through the slits at the top of the wall and from the towers, using binoculars. *“We never looked up at the towers; we kept our eyes strictly on the road, because any unnecessary movement could be seen as a provocation.”*

The story of Route 18’

Steinstücken is one of the most extraordinary chapters of the Cold War. **This area, covering just 13 hectares, was West Berlin’s only continuously inhabited exclave**, completely surrounded by the territory of the German Democratic Republic (GDR, East Germany). For decades, the village’s approximately 200 residents lived on the front line of world politics, cut off from the capital.



The Steinstücken exclave

When Greater Berlin was established in 1920, the surrounding settlements were incorporated into the capital. The lands of Steinstücken historically belonged to the landowners of the village of Stolpe (later Wannsee), who paid taxes to Berlin. Thus, the village legally became part of the Berlin-Zehlendorf district, although geographically it was wedged into the territory of Potsdam (Brandenburg).

beyond the Wall

After the Second World War, the victorious Allies divided the city along Berlin’s existing internal district boundaries. As Zehlendorf fell within the American occupation sector, Steinstücken, which belonged to it, automatically became part of the American zone, whilst the Soviet zone began immediately beyond the village’s boundaries.

Initially, residents and the Allies were able to pass freely through the East German territories surrounding the city into West Berlin. Later, the East German authorities set up checkpoints, but residents were still able to travel via a strictly guarded forest path and two border crossings.

On 18 October 1951, armed members of the East German People’s Police (Volkspolizei) suddenly

stormed into the village and attempted to annex it to the GDR. Due to resistance from the residents and fierce American diplomatic protests, the East Germans withdrew after a few days.

In August 1961, when the Wall was being erected, Steinstücken was also completely encircled by barbed wire and later by a concrete wall. The residents were not allowed to leave the village; West Berlin police and ambulances were not permitted to enter.



Through the Wall

Following the erection of the Berlin Wall on 13 August 1961, Steinstücken became one of the most unusual escape routes. As the village was initially surrounded only by barbed wire, East German refugees ‘merely’ had to get past the outer GDR perimeter to find themselves in the American sector – or, technically speaking, in West Berlin.

In August 1961, in the days immediately following the closure of the border, chaos reigned. Dozens of East German families rushed across the fields and through the gardens to Steinstücken. On some days, more than 20 refugees were hiding in houses in the village. American soldiers transported them by helicopter to the safe central districts of West Berlin.

An East German postman, who knew the borders around the village well, used his delivery route to make his escape. Whilst delivering official letters to houses in the GDR near the border, he simply jumped over the fence into the American sector. As his bag also contained official East German documents, he was immediately interrogated by American intelligence.

After the GDR reinforced the cordon around the village and built armed watchtowers, escape attempts became deadly. Despite this, several young people managed to get through the barbed wire

under cover of darkness, crawling through the trees. American military police (MP) were instructed that as soon as a fugitive reached the first houses in the village, they were to take them into protective custody immediately and, if necessary, use their weapons to prevent East German border guards from pursuing them.

The escapes came to an end when, by 1963, the GDR had replaced the barbed wire around the village's entire 3-kilometre perimeter with a massive, continuous concrete wall, and deployed armed patrols right up to the village's border.

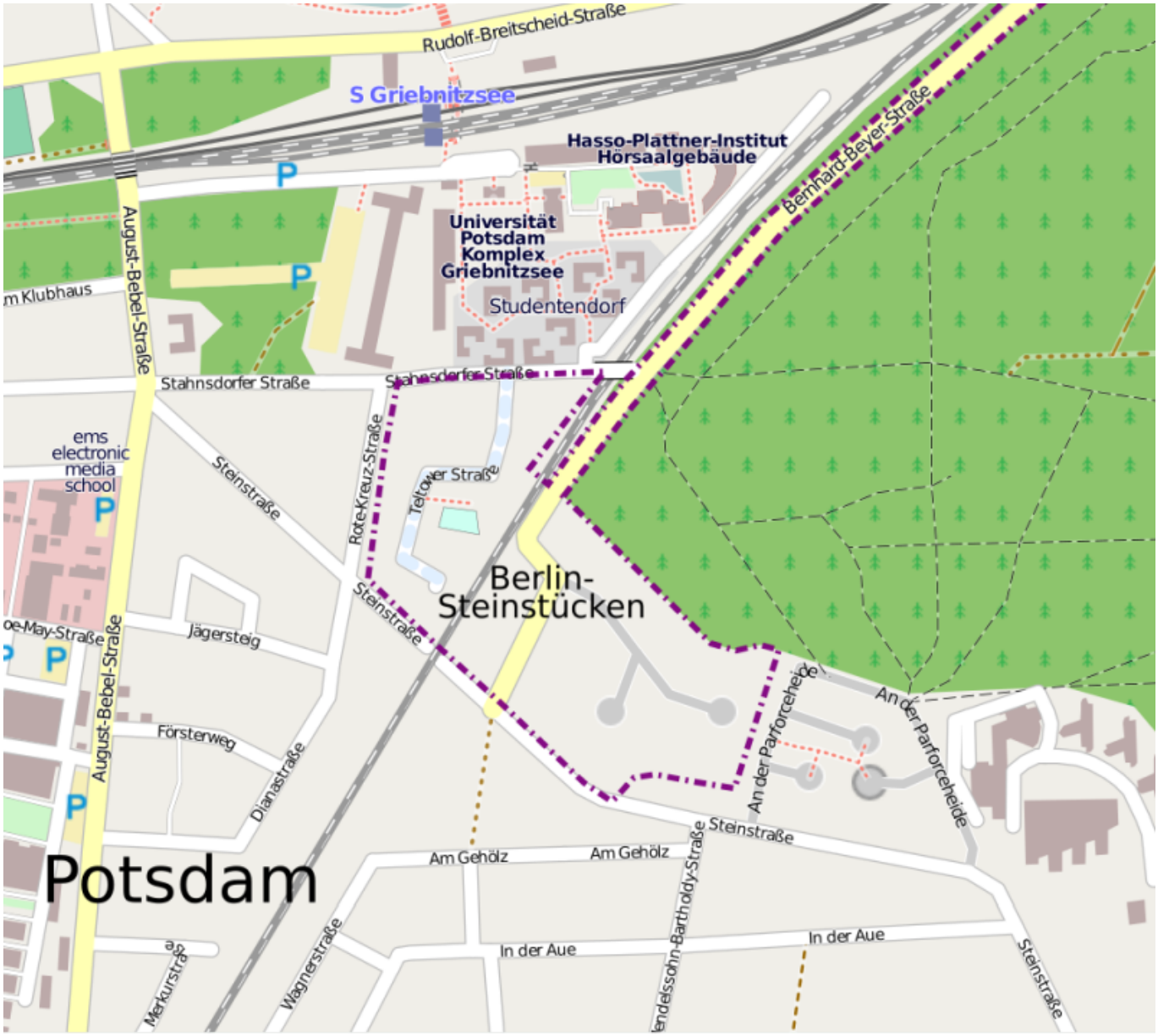
The helicopter 'Mini-Luftbrücke'

US General Lucius D. Clay recognised the political significance of the situation. To demonstrate the West's resolve, he had a military helicopter landing pad built in the village. Three American military police (MP) officers moved into the exclave; they were the *287th Military Police Company* . They were rotated in by helicopter, and essential supplies were also delivered by air. Steinstücken became a global symbol of Western resistance.

West Berlin refuse lorries were not allowed to enter the area, so the residents reached an agreement with the city of Potsdam: East German workers and refuse lorries would enter Steinstücken to collect the rubbish, for which the West Germans paid the GDR in West German marks (currency).

The village's electricity and gas supplies were provided via the East German grid. The GDR used this as a constant means of blackmail: in the event of any political tension, they could have (and sometimes did) restrict the supply.

As it was impossible to transport bricks, cement or beams by helicopter, the residents were unable to renovate their houses or build new ones for decades.



The land swap

This untenable and dangerous situation was finally resolved by a policy of détente and a truly astonishing land swap.

The Allies and the Soviet Union agreed on a settlement regarding the status of Berlin. As part of this, West Berlin paid 4 million West German marks to the GDR for a 20-metre-wide, 1-kilometre-long strip of land connecting the exclave to the rest of the city.

In 1972, the tarmac-surfaced connecting road was opened. At the GDR's insistence, the road was enclosed on both sides by 3-metre-high concrete walls, thus creating a closed corridor. It was along this corridor that the legendary No. 18 bus service began.

The No. 18 bus

The No. 118 bus (known as the No. 18 bus until the fall of the Wall) was one of the most bizarre public transport routes in history. It was special not only because of the concrete walls on either side, but

also because of the absurd, day-to-day protocols governing its operation.

Drivers had to undergo special training. They had to learn to remain calm under the pressure of having their every move watched by armed East German border guards from the watchtowers. The buses were equipped with a direct, secret radio link, which the driver could use to immediately alert the West Berlin police and the Allied Command if any extraordinary incident occurred in the corridor.

On reaching Steinstücken, the bus turned round in a small square and then set off back to West Berlin. For the locals, this bus represented their only real link to civilisation.

What happened if the bus broke down?

This was the greatest fear of the Western authorities. If the bus suffered a mechanical breakdown on the 1-kilometre stretch of East German territory surrounded by the Wall, it would have triggered an immediate international diplomatic crisis.

Neither the passengers nor the driver were allowed to leave the bus whilst on East German territory. The BVG (Berlin Transport Authority) could not simply send in a mechanic or another bus. In the event of every single technical fault, the Western allies had to contact the East German border guards through official channels to request permission for the rescue.

Occasionally, in order to find a quick solution, the East German authorities themselves would tow the broken-down West German bus off the corridor, for which, of course, they billed West Berlin substantial sums

A former pupil at Steinstücken recalled his school days as follows: *“Every morning, when the bus entered the zone between the walls, my stomach would knot up. We would pray that the bus wouldn’t get a puncture whilst in East German territory. If the bus made a strange noise, the whole bus would fall silent. We knew that if we stopped here, we wouldn’t be allowed to get off, and that there were armed guards standing just beyond the window.”*



The famous ‘Haustürservice’

The bus service had a truly unique, passenger-friendly feature during the Cold War. As the corridor and the area around the village were extremely dark and frightening at night (due to searchlights and armed guards on the other side of the wall), the BVG introduced the *‘Haustürservice’*. Late in the evening and at night, the driver would not only drop passengers off at the official stop but – if requested – would stop anywhere within the village, right at the front door of residents’ homes, so that no one would have to walk in the dark along the border.

The Christmas tree campaign

An elderly local resident recalled in a documentary that, in the 1970s, the drivers of the number 18 bus not only carried passengers but also acted as a sort of *smugglers* – in the most peaceful sense of the word. Around Christmas time, the drivers would bring in Christmas trees and large festive parcels from Zehlendorf, stowing them at the back of the bus between the rear seats, for those villagers who did not have a car.

The Fall of the Wall

When the Berlin borders were opened on the evening of 9 November 1989, moments of indescribable relief and euphoria ensued in Steinstücken.

The villagers immediately poured out onto the streets. For many of them, it was the first time in

decades that they had been able to walk out of the 20-metre-wide corridor without East German soldiers pointing their guns at them. In the inner parts of Berlin, the Wall began to be dismantled almost immediately by the *'wall-breaking woodpeckers'* (Mauerspechte); in Steinstücken, the residents themselves took up the tools.

They didn't want to wait: with hammers and pickaxes, they began to chip away at the concrete walls at the end of their block. The most moving moments were when the residents of Potsdam, living on the other side of the wall, and the people of Steinstücken finally shook hands. Many had lived barely 50 metres apart for decades without ever exchanging a single word. The border guards no longer intervened; they simply stood by and watched the celebrating crowd.

Within a few months, the entire concrete wall system had been dismantled from the area; the village ceased to be an exclave. The roads to Potsdam were also opened, and the residents were finally able to build and renovate their homes, and freely access the surrounding forests and lakes.

Today, Steinstücken is one of Berlin's quietest and most expensive residential areas in the green belt. The only reminder of this oppressive past is the military memorial in the centre of the village, shaped like two helicopter rotors, which commemorates the former American helicopter rescue operations.

What is the situation with the No. 118 bus these days?

The bus still runs between Zehlendorf and Steinstücken, but since the Wall was torn down, the route has been extended. The bus no longer turns back at the edge of the village, but continues into the former enemy territory, to Potsdam, all the way to the Stern-Center shopping centre.

To this day, many history enthusiasts visiting Berlin board the number 118 bus specifically to travel along the route that was once the world's most heavily guarded, walled military corridor.



The latest posts on the blog

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2026/07/16 13:11 · vamsan

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All I’m asking is that if you know anyone with whom you could have a good discussion about what’s written here, or if you’d simply like to share it with them, please don’t hesitate!

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All posts, sorted alphabetically, indexe can be found here. Posts on the blog that are linked to specific locations can also be found on Google Maps: The true wonders of the world.

2026/07/15 22:45 · vamsan

Sources

I also used Gemini AI to help write this post.

Sources used and recommended

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- Berliner Linienchronik (The complete, documented history of bus routes 18 and 118)
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- Atlas Obscura: The story of the memorial erected on the site of the former helicopter landing pad (in English)
- The Berlin Wall Archive: Mayor Klaus Schütz’s speech at the handover of the corridor in 1972 (archive video)

Image sources

- **Aerial view of the village enclosed by the Wall and the corridor:** Wikimedia Commons – Aerial view of Steinstücken (1989)
- **Bus No. 18 travelling along the passageway between the concrete walls:** Bundesarchiv / Wikimedia Commons - The bus in the corridor (1972)
- **The memorial now standing on the site of the helicopter landing pad:** Wikimedia Commons - The helicopter memorial today
- **The former GDR watchtowers along the corridor:** Berlin Wall Map – Archive photos and map of the border section

2026, West-Berlin, route 18, NDK, Fal, Steinstücken, Lucius D Clay, Potsdam, coldwar

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