

Communist Heritage Tourism and its Local (Dis)Contents at Checkpoint Charlie, Berlin

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This article focuses on a conflict that developed at Checkpoint Charlie in 2004 about the representation of the history of the famous site. It is argued that, in the deregulated Berlin heritage industry, urban streets prove to be the contested arenas in which questions of historic agency and display, as well as those of self and other, are (re)negotiated between public, private, local, and international actors, providing no ready-made scripts, but offering highly different negotiation powers for each of them.

With the Wall coming down in 1989, Checkpoint Charlie, divided Berlin's famous Allied border control point, became obsolete. Throughout the 1990s, millions of people witnessed the breathtaking transformation of the former checkpoint from a promising urban development site to a derelict symbol of the reunified city's failed investment politics, and, finally, to the former border crossing point being partially re-erected for tourist consumption by public and competing private initiatives.

Notwithstanding this continuing tourist and media interest, the disputed ways in which today's Checkpoint Charlie came into being have hardly caught the attention of the scientific community. Therefore, this article aims at identifying some of the public and private players in the politics of history and memory at Checkpoint Charlie, and at analyzing their diverging interests. To this end, the analyses will focus on a conflict that developed there between the Berlin government, the private Berlin Wall Museum, and a handful of drama students in the summer of 2004, and which led to a most controversial debate about how the history of the site should be represented. After investigating the

economic, political, and cultural background of the controversy, the conflict will be interpreted as illustrating the emergence of a Berlin heritage industry, the peculiarities of which will, finally, be characterized with a view to the complex ways in which urban conflicts are negotiated in times of globalization. The term “heritage industry” is employed with reference to the works of British and US researchers such as Robert Hewison (1987), David Lowenthal (1985; 1996), or John Urry (1990), who defined the heritage industry as an increasingly diversified and globalized tourism- and leisure-based industry that has evolved against the background of post-Fordism, and in which a variety of public, and, in particular, a growing number of private actors compete to create support for and revenue from anchoring their interpretation of history in public space (cf. Wright 1985; Fowler 1992; Rojek 1993; Samuel 1994, 1998; McCrone/Morris/Kiely 1995; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998; Arnold/Davies/Ditchfield 1998; Graham/Ashworth/Tunbridge 2000).

The history of Checkpoint Charlie

Checkpoint Charlie was inaugurated in September 1961 by the British, French, and US forces who had been stationed in Berlin since the end of World War II. One of the few inner-city border crossing points that connected the eastern and the western parts of divided Berlin, Checkpoint Charlie was reserved for diplomats, members of the Allied forces, and foreign travellers. However, only tourists were fully checked there, whereas diplomats and Allies were allowed to pass the control point uncontrolled, following the freedom-of-movement-agreement between the Soviets and the Western Allies (cf. Skiorski/Laabs 2003).

Until the fall of the Berlin Wall, Checkpoint Charlie developed into the city’s most famous border crossing point, and it did so for five reasons: first, it became famous as a dangerously “hot” site of the Cold War. In October 1961 it was the place where US and Soviet tanks faced each other, ready to shoot, after Soviet soldiers had refused to let an American diplomat pass the border uncontrolled. Soon after the conflict had been settled, Checkpoint Charlie hit the headlines again: second, the most famous Wall victim, 18-year-old Peter Fechter, bled to death close to Checkpoint Charlie after having been shot by East German soldiers during his attempt to escape to the West. Notwithstanding this, Checkpoint Charlie, third, also became renowned for more than 1200 successful flights to the West, since many GDR citizens made use of its special status by dressing up as Soviet majors or American soldiers, thus crossing the border unmolested. Fourth, in 1963 the West Berlin Wall Museum opened at Checkpoint Charlie to document both the history of the Wall and the flight stories. Founded by refugee smuggler Rainer Hildebrandt,

it became not only one of Berlin's best-visited museums, but also a centre of peaceful resistance against the Wall. Fifth, Checkpoint Charlie was heavily frequented, as it was the eye of the needle for foreign travellers wishing to enter East Berlin. Therefore, the border crossing point symbolized both hopeless division and a hopeful passage.

When the Wall came down in 1989, Checkpoint Charlie lost its function overnight. Following the ceremonious dismantling of the border crossing point in June 1990, the place, suddenly located in the "new centre" of the soon-to-be German capital, became attractive for investment. It was as early as February 1992 that the Berlin Senate sold the former borderland at Checkpoint Charlie to a private enterprise: the Central European Development Corporation (CEDC) planned to build an American Business Center on the premises that were soon meant to become the headquarters of some big service companies.

For the Berlin Senate, the sale of the land was very attractive, as it promised both a prestigious urban development project and the creation of jobs in times of public money shortage. Following reunification, Berlin had lost the generous financial feeds that both West Berlin, the "island city" of the Federal Republic of Germany, and East Berlin, the capital of the German Democratic Republic, had enjoyed. To provide the city, which was characterized by a backward industrial sector and high unemployment rates, with a new perspective, the Berlin Senate decided to attract foreign capital that should profit from a deregulated bureaucracy (cf. Lenhart 2001). Being Berlin's first major urban development project, the contract of purchase with the CEDC was signed rapidly, making no conditions as to the representation of the site of the famous former Allied checkpoint. Because of the ongoing dead calm in the Berlin real estate market, however, the project soon came to a halt. By the time the main investor left the CEDC in 1997, only three of the planned five blocks had been built, turning the former model project into an infamous urban planning torso.

As a consequence, the void CEDC grounds East of the former border were gradually taken over by hawkers who sold GDR-souvenirs to tourists. On Checkpoint Charlie's Western side, the Berlin Senate marked the former line of the Berlin Wall with cobblestones in 1997, responding to the rising tourist demand for signs of the vanished border. A year later, the previous border crossing point was further furnished with a large lighted box that displayed two photos of a Russian and an American soldier. Moreover, in 2001, Rainer Hildebrandt, still the director of the Berlin Wall Museum, donated to the former Checkpoint Charlie an exact replica of the dismantled Allied border control cabin. Garnished with fake flags and sand sacks, and combined with a copy of the famous warning sign "Your are leaving the American Sector...", the replica succeeded in re-establishing much of the former view of the once-

famous border crossing point (*Figure 1*). It was this replica which set the scene for a “burlesque” (Berliner Provinzposse 2004) that developed at Checkpoint Charlie in the summer of 2004.



Figure 1: Checkpoint Charlie with picture of border official (Berlin Senate), border sign and cabin replicas (Wall Museum), seen from the east (Photo: © Sybille Frank, 2004)

The “burlesque” of summer 2004

On the 3rd of June, 2004, the German press agency broadcast the following news: “In protest against the appearance of fake GDR policemen in front of the Berlin Wall Museum at Checkpoint Charlie as a tourist attraction, the world-famous former border crossing point has been wrapped up. ‘We can no longer tolerate that this symbol of division is being abused,’ the initiator Alexandra Hildebrandt, member of the Wall Museum, said” (quoted according to Protest gegen falsche DDR-Polizisten 2004).

In interviews with the rushed-to-the-scene reporters, the fake GDR policemen who had provoked the spectacular veiling turned out to be a group of drama students. For a few euros, the students, who were dressed in uniforms of the former GDR People’s Police, posed with tourists in front of the control cabin replica for photo-shoots, or pressed original GDR border stamps in passports. After some days of verbal clashes between the fake border officials and Alexandra Hildebrandt, who had become director of the Wall Museum

after the death of her husband Rainer Hildebrandt, Mrs. Hildebrandt had ordered a building firm to veil the control building with a tarpaulin.

In Alexandra Hildebrandt's opinion, the students' activities insulted the victims of German separation. She could not bear to witness how "a memorial place is being transformed into a Disneyland" (Hildebrandt, quoted according to Müller 2004), and she declared that she would "unveil the cabin only after the degrading spectacle has terminated, or after the Berlin government has called a halt to that offence against history" (press release of the Wall Museum, June 3, 2004).

Within the next few hours a rapid development of conflict lines could be observed: The director of the memorial for the victims of the GDR state security service, Hubertus Knabe, declared that he could "not understand the careless way in which the students treat the symbols of political persecution in the former GDR" (quoted according to Pletl 2004a). At the same time, the Association of Former Political Prisoners/Union of the Victims of Stalinism insisted on the immediate end to the activities—a demand that was supported by more and more victims' associations.

The drama students, however, felt irritated by the sudden uproar. Their speaker, Tom Luszeit, argued: "In Rome, there are gladiators in front of the Colosseum as well" (quoted according to Nickel 2004), and he informed the bewildered journalists that the students had posed in front of the cabin for months. After the former East Berlin district Mitte had refused to approve their action, they had asked the former West-Berlin district Kreuzberg for permission, which was granted in October 2003. Even though this made the students in their Eastern costumes stand on the historically "wrong" side of the border, i.e. the former Western side, and although the former Eastern border officials had not worn the uniforms of the GDR People's Police, but those of the GDR People's Army, the tourists' reactions had been enthusiastic. The students wanted to give the Berlin visitors "a live impression of what had happened at the place in former times." "I want to educate, not to insult the victims," Luszeit summarized the students' intents (quoted according to Müller 2004, Pletl 2004b).

With a view to the tense situation, a comment from the district Kreuzberg, which had approved the students' activities, was eagerly awaited. The town councillor in charge, Franz Schulz (Green Party), declared that it was neither forbidden to let oneself be photographed in the streets for money nor to wear a GDR People's Police uniform in public. When enquired about the control building, Schulz dissociated himself from the Wall Museum, denouncing its cabin replica as "Disneylike": "Quite obviously, neither does this cheap copy for tourists correspond to the dignity of the place" (quoted according to Schmidl 2004).

The next day, the situation suddenly changed: The students apologized to the victims' associations, replaced their GDR People's Police uniforms with those of the Western Allies and asked Alexandra Hildebrandt to uncover the control building. However, Hildebrandt insisted that she would only let people gaze at the cabin again if all commercial activities at Checkpoint Charlie were officially banned. As a surprise, the victims' associations now declared their solidarity with the students. For example, Herbert Pfaff, a representative of the memorial site for the victims of the GDR state security service, blustered: "Checkpoint Charlie is not the property of Mrs. Hildebrandt" (quoted according to Puppe 2004), and he demanded that the tarpaulin be taken away so that the victims of German separation could once again be commemorated at the historic site.

Finally, after some more days of fierce struggle, Berlin's Senator for city planning, Ingeborg Junge-Reyer (Social Democrats), intervened by issuing a three-point-press release. In the document, Junge-Reyer clarified that Checkpoint Charlie was a place "where the division of the city is commemorated, and not a place for masquerade" (Checkpoint Charlie ist kein Ort für Mummenschanz 2004). As the first of the recommended measures, the Senator called upon Alexandra Hildebrandt to remove the veiling of the cabin immediately, since it violated the special public space use permit agreed upon with the district. Second, a higher density of traffic police controls at Checkpoint Charlie was announced, so that free traffic flow would be guaranteed. As a third instruction, a zebra crossing was to be installed next to the traffic island, in which the control building was located, in order to raise pedestrian traffic safety.

These three "traffic" instructions in fact meant a defeat for both of the contending parties: While Alexandra Hildebrandt was obligated to unveil the building, the announced traffic police controls and the zebra crossing equalled a trading prohibition for the students: they were no longer allowed to pose on the street for their photo-shoots, and the traffic island would be restricted soon as well, as trading on zebra crossings was generally prohibited. Consequently, only the narrow sidewalks at Checkpoint Charlie could be legally used by the students in the future.

Following a police raid against the students, Alexandra Hildebrandt finally unwrapped the control cabin. But the students returned, temporarily taking up position on the traffic island with the control building (*Figure 2*). Ironically enough, this decision now made the *tourists* fall victim to the intensified police guard: as it was now they who had to step on the street to take pictures of the students from a good perspective, they had to be escorted back to the sidewalks by the policemen. And, even more ironically, in doing so, it was now the "real" policemen who turned into desired photo objects. Quite

obviously, the heightened police presence at the former border crossing point augmented the authenticity of the historic place, known to be a checkpoint.

While analyzing some of the economic, political, and cultural backgrounds of the conflict in the following, the focus will lie on Alexandra Hildebrandt's activities, as it was she who staged the described fight as a media event—a fight about the question of what today's Checkpoint Charlie should stand for, and who should have a say in it.



Figure 2: Drama students dressed in uniforms of the Western Allies
(Photo: © Sybille Frank, 2004)

The economic perspective

From the economic perspective, the conflict can be interpreted as Alexandra Hildebrandt's fight to monopolize the profits that come with the internationally renowned place by transforming it into a showcase for her Wall Museum. To achieve this, the museum director engaged in a strategy that can be called *profit generation by spacing*. Spacing was important as it could provide for *hereness*: as the American researcher Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has noted, the successful production of a heritage destination necessitates the creation of hereness, which can be achieved either by actualities, or, in the absence of actualities, by virtualities (1998: 167). In the case of dismantled Checkpoint Charlie, hereness obviously had to be produced by virtualities, which were provided by the museum's replicas of the control cabin and the famous border

sign. As these copies put the historic place back on the Berlin map, it was also, subsequently, put back on tourist bus itineraries.

Moreover, once the tourists had reached Checkpoint Charlie, spacing could *channel* them into the museum by using the replicas as signposts. For example, a board under the famous border sign informs the visitors: “This sign is a copy. The original still exists and can be seen in the Haus am Checkpoint Charlie”—which is the German name of the Wall museum. Finally, spacing could help to maximize profits through the displacement of competitors. Accordingly, Alexandra Hildebrandt used the wrapped-up control cabin as a pledge against the students who had degraded the building to a photo background and obstructed its advertising function for the museum. But, as described, the veiling of the building was also intended to focus public attention on the “commercialization” of the historic site, and to push for a grand political solution. In order to strengthen the museum’s position in this process, however, the public had to take the side of the museum and its interpretation of history.

The political perspective

Hence, the political perspective shows the burlesque as a struggle about *what* should be commemorated at the historic site. In this context, Alexandra Hildebrandt was aiming at establishing Checkpoint Charlie as a *victims’ place* in public memory, and at anchoring the museum as the *victims’ advocate* in public discourse.

To construct Checkpoint Charlie as a victims’ place, Hildebrandt set out to criticize the other commercial suppliers at Checkpoint Charlie for capitalizing on the victims’ pains. This implied a scandalization of the students’ activities as “a disgrace of the Berlin Wall victims” and “an offence against history” (press release of the Wall Museum, June 3, 2004)—a point of view that was soon supported by the victims’ associations. As a consequence, the fact that Checkpoint Charlie had been world-famous for numerous successful escapes to the West receded into the background. At the same time, Hildebrandt’s attempt to establish the museum as the victims’ advocate in the public discourse could distract from the fact that, since the fall of the Wall, the former non-profit Wall Museum had also changed into a profit-oriented private enterprise that capitalized on the victims’ stories. Throughout the 1990s, the museum’s exhibition concept had been changed according to an event- and adventure-based dramaturgy, new rooms had been rented and a museum shop had been opened so that, after the museum officially relinquished all subsidies in 2002, it managed to establish a reputation as Europe’s most successful commercial museum (cf. Engel/Konnerth 1998; Kunzemann 2002).

Nonetheless, to perpetuate the museum's acclaimed traditional image as an unselfish, courageous advocate of the oppressed, however, today's institution is promoted by Alexandra Hildebrandt as the lifework of museum founder Rainer Hildebrandt, the political activist and refugee smuggler. This message is again communicated by the disputed control cabin, which was changed into a memorial for Mr. Hildebrandt shortly after his death in early 2004: the windows of the cabin have been covered with copies of the museum's press release that informs about the local hero's life and death. Behind the windows, a huge oil-painting portrays Rainer Hildebrandt. Next to the building, flowers have been piled up to commemorate the deceased museum director.

Therefore, the students' activities did not just disgrace the victims of the Wall. According to Alexandra Hildebrandt, they also defiled the remembrance of her husband (cf. Müller 2004). Publicly staged like this, the reference to refugee smuggler Rainer Hildebrandt did not only bear the potential of identifying today's private museum with the former political non-profit organization, but also of making the discourse on Checkpoint Charlie as a victims' place more plausible.

The cultural perspective

Last but not least, the cultural perspective brings cultural value systems and practices into focus and shows today's Checkpoint Charlie as a site where local traditions of historic agency and display *clash* with traditions brought along with tourists from all over the world.

This point can be illustrated by the accusation of Disneyfication that accompanied the whole debate as a leitmotif. First launched by Alexandra Hildebrandt against the students' activities, it was later turned against the Wall Museum's cabin replica by town councillor Franz Schulz, and, finally, bundled in the press against all commercial suppliers at Checkpoint Charlie, who were criticized for reshaping the historic site as a spectacular place of event and sentiment, thereby violating the authenticity, respectability, and truthfulness of the historic site. While serving as a cultural demarcation line against the "fake" and "commercialization," the Disneyfication reproach thus implicitly suggested that there was something "original" and "inalienable" to be protected at dismantled Checkpoint Charlie—which turned out to be the locality itself.

The logic behind this is uncovered by Frank Schulz's earlier critique of the cabin replica: In stating that "Quite obviously, neither does this cheap copy for tourists correspond to the dignity of the place" (quoted according to Schmidl 2004), Schulz extended his critique of the cabin to its consumers, the tourists. Apparently, the tourists did not seem to care whether or not the ob-

jects presented to them at Checkpoint Charlie were originals or copies. To them, it was far more important that they could *experience* the famous Cold War site—which also embraced, as described, the overall presence of policemen. Therefore, the fact that Checkpoint Charlie, which had been proudly dismantled in 1990, was partly reconstructed by a set of private actors for tourist consumption a decade later, was scandalized as an undesirable change of the locality under the grasp of global tourism. Accordingly, it was provocative that the students, in defending their costumed activities, did not refer to the local tradition of flight masquerades through Checkpoint Charlie during Cold War times, but, as quoted above, to the fake Gladiators in front of the Colosseum in Rome.

In sum, the import of both the American Disney and the American *Living History* model with its historic re-enactments to Berlin, and its success with foreign tourists, confronted the city with a new—globally induced—problem that still had to be negotiated locally: the question how to integrate differing cultural values and practices at a place that had only recently been constructed as a “sacred” victims’ site.

Conclusion

Putting together the three perspectives, the Checkpoint Charlie case illustrates the conflict-laden formation phase of a post-Wall Berlin heritage industry that can be characterized by the following three points:

First, the described conflict shows the formation of a Berlin heritage industry *beyond political regulations*. While most of the Anglo-American heritage research identifies national, regional, or communal governments as well-organized actors who deliberately initiate specific public-private-partnerships in the field of heritage politics to exploit it, for example, as a means of local economic regeneration or to exert power over social groups (c.f. Wright 1985; Lowenthal 1985; 1996; Hewison 1987), the Checkpoint Charlie case introduces a Berlin government that is highly disorganized. First, the Berlin Senate sold the premises at Checkpoint Charlie to an international investor without giving any instructions as to how the famous historic place should be represented. Second, following the investor’s breakdown, a potpourri of private actors was invited by the two involved districts to capitalize on the history of the former control point—once more without the issuing of any regulations as to what should be presented at Checkpoint Charlie, or how that should be done. The described conflict forced the lack of concepts and ready measures of Berlin’s governing bodies to address the city’s Cold War history and to regulate those private actors on the public agenda for the first time, leading to it being referred to as a “burlesque.”

The second peculiarity of the Berlin heritage industry is its spontaneous formation *beyond sites*. While the vast majority of heritage research describes the ongoing global heritage boom as a purposeful restaging of historic relics as *sites* (c.f. Urry 1990; Rojek 1993), Checkpoint Charlie is neither a place where historic remnants can be found nor a space that has been nominated for commemoration. Having been spontaneously resurrected by a set of actors who tried to meet a continuing tourist demand, today's Checkpoint Charlie therefore catapults the supply- and site-oriented heritage discussion to a demand-oriented level on which *urban streets* come into focus. In this constellation the addressees change: while designated sites primarily appeal to *tourist* needs, the revivification of Checkpoint Charlie at the same time needs to be conveyed, as a publicly accessible inner-city space, to *locals*, too. It is this need to create local support for the restaging of the famous place that explains Alexandra Hildebrandt's strategy to anchor Checkpoint Charlie as a "dark" victims' spot in the local perception, and to use the Berliners' subsequent *prise de conscience* for the former border control point to engage them in a Disneyfication discourse which aimed to degrade and displace the museum's commercial competitors. Accordingly, Checkpoint Charlie became connected with local discourses that separated "admissible" from "degrading" cultural practices, turning the derelict place into a "sacred site," and the replica of the Allied control cabin that had itself been accused for being Disneylike shortly before, into a symbol of local identity and pride eagerly defended by the victims' associations.

As a third point, the Checkpoint Charlie example contradicts heritage theories that lament the power of the global over the local (c.f. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998). On the contrary, the urban conflict that was negotiated here shows the (re)construction of the locality as a *reciprocal negotiation process* into which both global and local images of the place have entered.

On the global-local level, the tourist demand and presence has shaped both Checkpoint Charlie's material face and local commemorative traditions. While Berlin's hitherto existing places dedicated to the Cold War victims were located at original sites, away from tourist routes, the identification of the victims' associations with today's resurrected Checkpoint Charlie shows a twofold adoption of practices that had been dismissed as "Disneylike" before the conflict: first, the victims' identification with a *replica*, i.e. the control cabin replica, and, second, the desire to anchor the remembrance of the Wall victims in a centre of international *attention*. These processes indicate the victims' turning away from the traditional European idea of the inalienability of originals for commemoration, both with a view to original historic objects and to original historic places.

On the local-global level, the rise and maintenance of the victims' perspective has functioned as a local corrective against the tourists, for whom the

thrilling Cold War history of Checkpoint Charlie—with the tanks that faced each other—makes up the sensation of the place. This perspective even led to the widely-reported opening of a private Wall victims' memorial on the Eastern side of Checkpoint Charlie in October 2004, donated by the Wall Museum, which was torn down by the credit company administering the former CEDC grounds in July 2005, despite substantial local and international protest. By this, the burlesque of summer 2004 has, in the long run, also led to the public insight that reunified Berlin's governing bodies and local groups urgently need to find their position as to the city's globally popular, but locally still very unpopular, Cold War history if they want this history to be told by themselves and not by others.

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