FROM MY BOOKSHELF 30.08.2017 | Emma Bullimore

Dear Mr Trump: please read this book

Paul Hockenos' 'Berlin Calling' reveals the truth about living behind a wall – from Bowie's bohemia to neo-Nazi clashes

I remember the first time I heard about the Berlin Wall.

After years of repetitive school history lessons on Hitler, our teacher went off piste by deciding to show us the brilliant film, *Good Bye Lenin!* (about a citizen from East Germany who awakes from a coma after the country has reunified).

To put the movie into context, she started to explain about East and West Berlin, about one city divided into two completely opposing ideologies and a wall that split families apart overnight.

I was mesmerised by the idea. How had I not heard about this before? How could it have happened in the first place? How did such a thriving, cool capital cope with this brutal divide in the same century as two devastating conflicts?

Since then, Oscar winning film *The Lives of Others* about a Stasi officer with a conscience, and celebrated TV series *Deutschland 83* have got us talking about the Iron Curtain once again. And the latest book from journalist Paul Hockenos, *Berlin Calling*, offers another fascinating glimpse into Cold War Berlin.

Part memoir, part history lesson, the book bills itself as 'a story of anarchy, music, the wall and the birth of the New Berlin,' promising new insights into the achingly cool musicians, artists and boundary pushers that made West Berlin a throbbing cultural metropolis.

And all the big names are there – the ones you've heard of like Iggy Pop and David Bowie, ironically at his least flamboyant frequenting tiny Berlin clubs in rolled up jeans, and the vivacious scene-stealers you wish you could have met.

Hockenos moved to West Berlin in 1985, 'fleeing New York, Reagan-era America and the pressure to choose a career,' and it's the capitalist US sector he kicks off with. We're all intrigued by the East German secret police, the mysterious communist goings-on and queues to buy an exotic bunch of bananas. But what of this weird chunk of Western civilisation, peering over a wall into communism?

Hockenos describes it as an endlessly appealing sanctuary, not just for people like him who didn't quite know what to do with their lives. It was a beguiling haven for anyone with an alternative view of the world, from punks and squatters to those dodging national service or coming out as gay or transgender.

Philosophy, music, art, sex and politics were all to be re-evaluated and experimented with in this 'deluxe ghetto' where the living wasn't necessarily easy, but was definitely good fun. Anyone who has visited Berlin's famous East Side Gallery will smile at the stories of artists pushing their luck with border guards as they tried to spruce up the wall with more than just a bit of paint...

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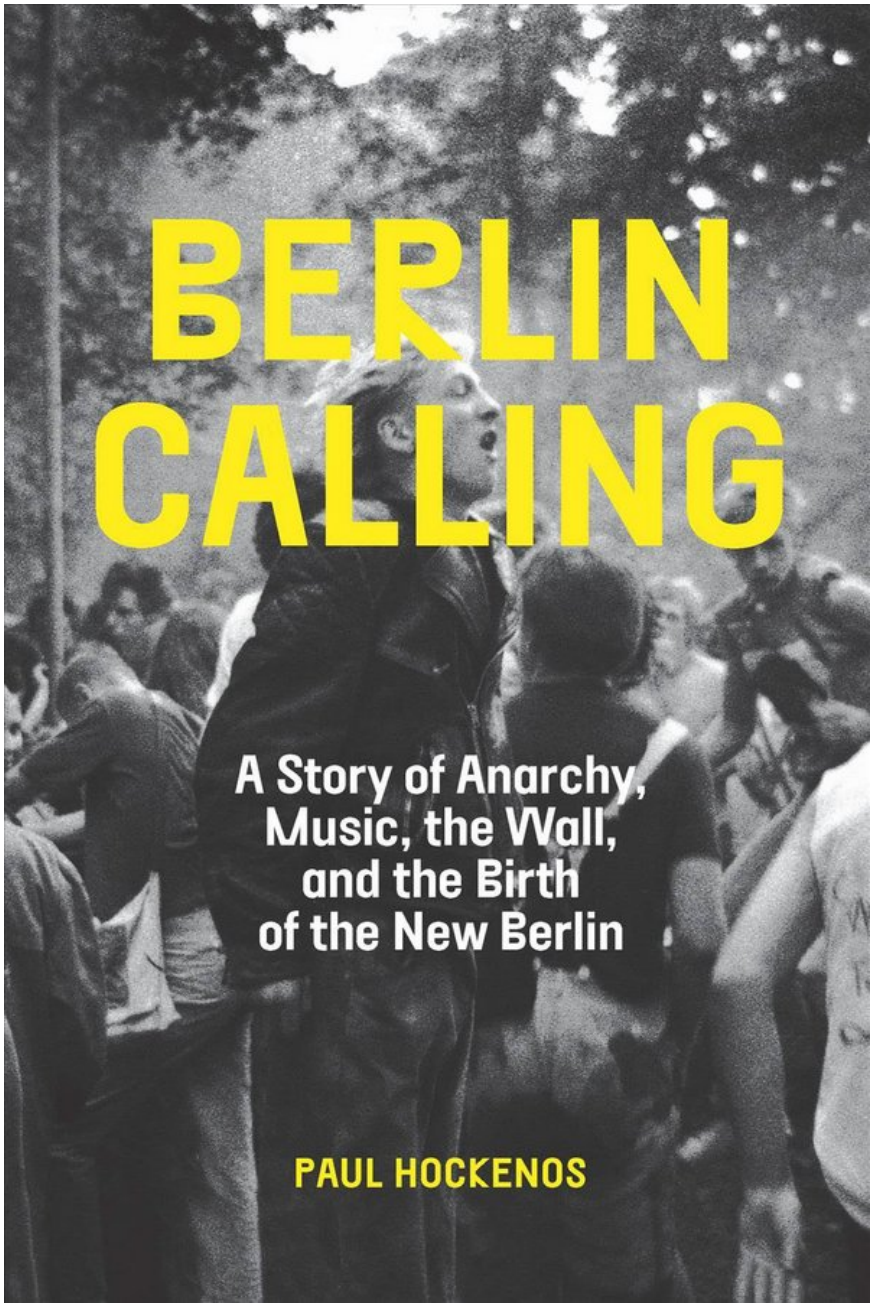
As an American living in the West, Hockenos was able to travel to the East, but only when dressed appropriately, and when the guards were in the right mood. On this side of the wall it was trickier to find room for artistic expression, but many managed it, and radios were tuned into John Peel and other Western influences.

Many readers will buy this book and immediately flick through to find the Bowie stories. And they won't be disappointed: Hockenos paints an irresistibly vivid picture of Ziggy Stardust and his contemporaries dominating an irrepressible scene, where 'conditions existed to allow the imagination to run riot.'

But there's so much more to this book than the punks and the hipsters, not least of all the harrowing tales of neo-Nazism, rearing its ugly head in both the East and the West, with shocking consequences.

No matter how progressive the art, the ghosts of a fascist past are not easily exorcised. Perhaps Mr Trump would do well to read these stories and discover the true human cost of erecting a wall. No number of fun anecdotes about Blixa Bargeld can gloss over the reality that East Germans trying to sneak across the border were mercilessly murdered – and that such killings became the norm.

Disappointingly, the book ends with a slightly tedious conversation about the threat of gentrification, a discussion best left for another time. After all, while it may not be as bohemian as before the Wall, Berlin remains a cool, powerful and enigmatic city with a history none of us can afford to forget.





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