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WINNING IDEAS

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We recently caught up with Dr. Rainer Zitelmann, historian, author, and real estate expert, to talk about izzit.org's upcoming educational unit, ***Life Behind The Berlin Wall***. Zitelmann worked with izzit.org to develop the teaching materials and serves as the video's content expert.

Tell us what the *Life Behind the Berlin Wall* educational unit is about.

Germany was a divided country between 1945 and 1989 – a socialist planned economy prevailed in the east, a market economy in the west. The film shows what impact this had on the everyday lives of people in both parts of Germany. How long did it take to get a car or an apartment? What was the state of environmental pollution in both parts of Germany? The film gives a platform to people who lived behind the Wall at the time, as well as historians, like myself.

Why did you decide to do this educational unit with izzit.org?

The idea originated with Bob Chitester, who had invited me to spend a few days in Milton Friedman's former summer house "Capitaf" in the mountains of Vermont. Chitester had read my book *The Power of Capitalism* and suggested turning it into a TV series. After Chitester's death, Rob Chatfield had the excellent idea of making a film about life in East and West Germany as a first step. I was of course thrilled by his idea, because from my point of view there is no one who can do something like this better than the team at Free To Choose® Network and izzit.org.



Appearing throughout the program is a series of "then and now" visuals. In this example, the East German government continued the rent freeze that was implemented during Adolph Hitler's time, which left no money for maintenance or modernization of property.

What do you hope students learn from it?

I think that in schools today, students often learn too little about how free-market and planned economies work. And I don't mean abstract, theoretical models. I mean: How do these two systems shape people's lives in specific terms? The film conveys historical knowledge in a vivid and exciting way.

On which side of the Wall did you live?

I lived in West Germany. In 1987, two years before the Wall came down, I moved to West Berlin because I was



Dr. Rainer Zitelmann of
Life Behind the Berlin Wall

teaching history at the Free University there. I still remember the day the Wall fell: I skipped my seminar, of course, and went to the Wall with the students to greet the thousands of citizens who, for the first time, had the freedom to travel from East to West Berlin.

Did you or your family own a Trabi? If so, what was it like?

No, my parents drove a Volkswagen. And I drove a Mercedes. In West Germany, almost no one drove a Trabi.

What is the most startling difference in Germany since the Wall came down?

People are no longer prisoners in their own land. They can travel anywhere, all over the world. And the cities in East Germany look completely different. Where there used to be run-down buildings, some of which were almost ruins, they have now been renovated and a lot of money and love has been invested. The cityscape has totally changed. And today, almost everyone in East and West has a cell phone, whereas before the Wall was built, only 16 percent of people in the East had a phone of their own.

Do you think most Germans appreciate capitalism over socialism today?

I think hardly anyone wants to go back to socialism as it was implemented in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). But there are still some who dream of making what they call a “better kind of socialism.” Most Germans, however, support the market economy.

Are there any Germans left who preferred life behind the Wall?

Even those who criticize capitalism, and even the supporters of the main left-wing party “Die Linke” (which used to be the communist party – the Socialist Unity Party (SED) – that ruled over the GDR and later renamed itself), don’t want to rebuild the Wall. But unfortunately, there are still plenty of people that haven’t understood that the Wall was just a logical consequence of an economic system that simply didn’t work. Today, many Germans, for example, are in favor of nationalizing large housing companies or prohibiting rent increases, even though this is precisely what led to the catastrophic housing situation in the GDR.



In East Germany, consumer products were nowhere near the quality as those in the West. The Trabant (or “Trabi”), considered one of the worst cars in the world, is a perfect example. It had no fuel gauge, no turn signals or brake lights, and a top speed of 62 MPH!

Life Behind the Berlin Wall will be available in July 2022.