The Art of Rebellion?

Finding the Causes for the Changing Eras in the Periodization of the Graffiti on the Berlin Wall

OURE Fellows Proposal

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For my research under OURE in 2021, I proposed a periodization theory for the graffiti on the Berlin Wall. I compared and analyzed ten images of the Berlin Wall in Potsdamer Platz to find changes that could be discovered in the markings seen on the wall. These images spanned the years 1968-1989 and my analysis of them showed that the graffiti found in them could be divided into four eras: no graffiti (1961-1969), political graffiti (1970-1982), artistic graffiti (1983-1989), and memorial graffiti (1990-present). This periodization allows for a better understanding about how the relationship between the Berlin Wall and the West Berliners living near it evolved throughout its existence. It, however, can still be expanded on and refined.

My theory is one that claims a general periodization for the entire Berlin Wall, but the images used are only from one section of the wall found in Potsdamer Platz. My theory also only stated what the different eras of graffiti were, and left questions and hypotheses of what exactly caused each era to occur when it did. Was Social Democrat Willy Brandt becoming Chancellor after the protest years of 1967-1968 the reason political graffiti began appearing in 1970? Was the era of “no graffiti” caused by fears of East German retribution? Were Soviet economic issues the reason the wall began to be covered in more and more graffiti in the 1980s? Was the graffiti used as a medium of rebellion, and if so, was it against the wall, East Germany, or something else? These are among the new questions brought about by my OURE project that I would like to answer. That is why, for OURE Fellows, I would like to continue my research on the Berlin Wall graffiti. I will use my time in this program to cross reference images of the Berlin Wall from different sections, to test my theory and see if it stands or if it requires revision. I will also use this program to find causes for each of the eras of this theory, and I will use primary sources to better understand the meanings found in the graffiti on the wall, and what the wall meant to the civilians forced to live near it in each of the eras. For my research with OURE Fellows I will
follow a strict but flexible timeline that will allow me to validate my theory created with OURE, while also allowing me to expand upon my theory by finding causes for each era of graffiti in order to better understand the relationship between the Berlin Wall and the West Berliners forced to live under its shadow.

This research is significant as my OURE project revealed to me that interpretations of the graffiti on the Berlin Wall and the relationship between the wall and the West Berliners are both topics that are seldom written about by scholars. When these topics are mentioned, they are given very little limelight and are usually quick passages in the author’s work. Putting both center of attention, my research aims to deepen our understanding of Cold War politics and culture. I will use more primary sources for this research, using databases like Alamy and GettyImages to find more images of the wall. I will also use other databases like those of newspapers from West Berlin and that of the Berlin-Chronik with the Landesarchiv Berlin to find statements from citizens who lived with the wall and possibly even painted graffiti on it, allowing me to better interpret the meaning of the markings on the wall. These are the best to look at for my research as they will give first-hand accounts of the people who lived with the Berlin Wall, giving the actual opinions they have of it. Using secondary sources will allow me to use previously written histories to understand in summarized senses what was going on in a larger scale in Germany and Berlin for things like politics, economics, culture, and more. My research will also allow me to connect the discipline of history with other disciplines like Germanic studies and media studies.

Thanks to my past experiences, I am very qualified to join this program and commit to this research. As a student of the Missouri S&T history department, I have had many different experiences with historical research. I have already mentioned how I previously wrote a report
for OURE, which already focused on more basic ideas of this topic, already giving me knowledge over the subjects I will be writing over in this project. Through OURE I was also selected to represent Missouri S&T with my research for Capitol Day. For this I created a short video summarizing my research for the politicians in Jefferson City. I have also written a short research report for the Missouri Humanities Council over food on the Trail of Tears and the differences between it and the food the Cherokee had in the land they were forced to leave. This report can be found on the interactive Trail of Tears map on the Missouri Humanities Council website. In Fall of 2020 I wrote a research report over the Missouri state fossil, the crinoid, writing about what it was, its story of how it became the state fossil, and using other fossils found in the state to help emphasize its struggle to become a representative of Missouri. This was written for UMKC’s Show me Missouri project in celebration of Missouri’s bicentennial anniversary. By the end of this semester (spring 2021) I will also have written another research report for UMKC’s project, but this time it will be written about a hometown hero of mine named Tom Bass who was a world famous African-American horse rider and showman. I not only have experience with research, but I will also be in my final year of college between 2021 and 2022, meaning I also bring experience in time management, professionalism, and education that I have learned throughout my years at Missouri S&T. My previous research projects and my experience gained at Missouri S&T make me more than qualified to commit to this research.

In order for me to be able to complete this research, I have created a malleable but precise schedule. My research process will begin on May 24th, 2021. Throughout the summer months after this date (the rest of May, June, July and the early half of August) I will prepare by finding more sections of the Berlin Wall that have multiple images spanning multiple years, so that they may be later analyzed and cross referenced with my previous findings in Potsdamer Platz. I will
meet with my research advisor, Dr. Andrew Behrendt, at least once a month in this period to discuss my preparations and findings.

Starting August 23rd, 2021, I will begin analyzing and comparing the images of the Berlin Wall that I have found throughout the summer, while also beginning to read primary and secondary sources to begin the process of finding causes for each of the eras. Also starting at this time, I will be meeting with Dr. Behrendt every week for reports of my findings. By September 30th, I will be finished comparing the different images found of the Berlin Wall and will be done either validating or editing my periodization theory to better encompass the entirety of the Berlin Wall. At this point a majority of my focus will then be spent on using primary and secondary sources to find the causes of each era of my periodization theory. Weekly meetings and primary and secondary source analysis will be the focus of my research until January 1, 2022.

Starting the first day of January in 2022 I will still be reading to find causes of the different eras of my theory, but I will also begin slowly writing sections of my final report and oral presentation for the 2022 Undergraduate Research Conference. As January moves into February, I will slowly begin easing my focus more and more on the final report, making edits when necessary as new information is found in this period. When March 1st arrives, however, I will begin putting all of my focus onto the final report, allowing for time for critique and edits. This will occur until the date of the 2022 Undergraduate Research Conference, where I will give my final presentation of my research.

With a timeline prepared, and plans created for my research process, I am ready to continue my project with the OURE Fellows program. My previous research projects and my experiences gained from Missouri S&T make me more than qualified to commit to this research. The only other thing that makes me more qualified is my excitement to begin the research
process over my topic. Finding the changing relationship between the Berlin Wall and the West Berliners forced to live near it by finding the causes of the different eras of my periodization theory of the graffiti on the wall will add to the parts of the history of the Berlin Wall that are greatly lacking in the academic world. It is with OURE Fellows that I will be able to add to this history and change the way people think about the Berlin Wall.