

The Berlin Wall

A BARRIER TO FREEDOM—1961-1989

Imagine waking up one morning and finding a wall separates you from the other side of town. If your grandmother lives across town, you can no longer visit. If your parents have jobs on the other side of town, they must find new jobs. You can no longer go to the other side of town for any reason.

That's what happened on Aug. 13, 1961 in Berlin, Germany. People who lived in East Berlin awoke to find that overnight workers had

with watchtowers, patrolling soldiers and minefields.

After **World War II**, the United States, Great Britain, France and the **Soviet Union** divided the conquered country of Germany and its capital city, Berlin, into four zones. The U.S., Great Britain and France combined their zones to form **West Germany**. The Soviet Union created **East Germany**.

Living conditions in the East and West became very different. West Germany prospered. People living there were able to live well, buy goods and travel. But the Soviet Union depleted East Germany's assets. Under communist rule, the economy suffered and individual freedoms were restricted.

East Germans began moving into West Berlin. By 1961, more than 2 million people had left. Desperate to keep its citizens, East Germany decided to build a wall to keep its people from crossing

destroyed the streets into West Berlin and erected a barbed wire fence border. Whichever side of the border people went to sleep on the night of Aug. 12 was the side they were stuck on for the next 28 years.

The East German government built the Berlin Wall to keep its citizens from crossing into West Germany for a better life. It stretched 96 miles and cut off more than 60,000 people. Eventually, the Wall became a concrete fortress

"General Secretary Gorbachev, if you seek peace, if you seek prosperity for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, if you seek liberalization: Come here to this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!"

—U.S. President Ronald Reagan, West Berlin, June 1987

the border.

For nearly three decades, the Berlin Wall was both a physical division between West Berlin and East Berlin and East Germany and a symbolic boundary between democracy and **communism** during what is called the **Cold War**.

By 1989, communism was faltering in parts of the Soviet Union and border restrictions were eased, opening a hole in the **Iron Curtain**. East German citizens began protests called the **Peaceful Revolution**.

On Nov. 9, 1989, the East German government announced that

"It was dreadful to see how the people were standing there, waving to the other side, to their loved ones. You saw them crying and you saw the hankies. It was so painful."

—Inga Deutscom, East Berliner

it was easing restrictions on the border into West Berlin. People from both sides began crossing. There were celebrations with people

hugging, crying and cheering as the Berlin Wall, a barrier to freedom, fell.

East and West Germany reunified into a single German nation, the Federal Republic of Germany, and Berlin became a single city on Oct. 3, 1990.

The Berlin Wall was officially demolished beginning in June of 1990, although pieces small and large became collectibles and can be found in homes and museums.



FASCINATING FACTS ABOUT THE BERLIN WALL

- The Berlin Wall began as a fence but evolved to include an inner wall, a 300-foot No-Man's Land, soldiers patrolling with dogs, anti-vehicle trenches, electric fences, massive light systems, watch towers, and minefields.
- The fourth and final version of the Berlin Wall consisted of concrete slabs reaching nearly 12-feet high, and 4-feet wide.
- A few openings along the Berlin Wall, called checkpoints, were used by officials with special permission to cross the border. The most famous, Checkpoint Charlie, was on the border between East and West Berlin and was featured in movies and books.
- More than 100 people died trying to cross the border into West Germany and thousands were imprisoned. Guards were instructed to shoot traitors trying to escape.
- Border hostilities had already made Berlin the only place in Germany where people could move back and forth within the country.
- Official demolition of the Berlin Wall started on June 13, 1990. Parts had been chipped away for souvenirs beginning on Nov. 9, 1989. People who did this were known as "wall woodpeckers."
- The longest surviving stretch of the Berlin Wall is a 1.3 km-long (almost one mile) painted stretch along the Mühlenstrasse in former East Berlin. It is the largest open-air gallery in the world with 105 paintings by artists from all over the world, painted in 1990 on the east side of the Berlin Wall.
- After the reunification of Germany, it took 65 cranes, 175 trucks and 13 bulldozers to remove the 204,100-ton barrier that was the Berlin Wall. More than 40,000 segments were crushed to make materials, primarily for building roads.
- Segments of the Berlin Wall were auctioned as art objects, purchased or donated to museums and institutions around the world. At least 50 are on display in the United States.

WORDS TO KNOW

World War II—A war fought from 1939 to 1945, in which the U.S., Great Britain, France, the Soviet Union, China, and other allies defeated Germany, Italy, and Japan.

West Germany—new organization of Germany formed in 1949 when the three zones occupied by the U.S., Great Britain and France combined to form the Federal Republic of Germany, or West Germany.

East Germany—the fourth zone occupied by the Soviet Union formed the German Democratic Republic, or East Germany.

Soviet Union—Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), a former country, which included modern-day Russia and adjacent states. The USSR was a major world power during its existence, which began with the Russian Revolution of 1917 until its collapse in 1991.

Communism—political and economic systems where all property is public and people work and are given things by the government according to their needs.

Cold War—state of political hostility between countries

characterized by threats but not military action. This type of rivalry existed between the Soviet Union and the U.S. after World War II until the late 1980s.

Iron Curtain—barrier to communication or information that includes censorship and secrecy; used to describe the boundary between democratic and communist countries.

Peaceful Revolution—protests by East German citizens that led to elections, the transition to parliamentary democracy, and the reunification of Germany.

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