

Brief History of the Berlin Wall

What Was the Berlin Wall?

The Berlin Wall was both the physical division between West Berlin and East Germany from 1961 to 1989 and the symbolic boundary between democracy and Communism during the Cold War.

A Divided Berlin

At the end of World War II, the Allied powers divided conquered Germany into four zones, each occupied by either the United States, Great Britain, France, or the Soviet Union (as agreed at the Potsdam Conference). The same was done with Germany's capital city, Berlin.

As the relationship between the Soviet Union and the other three Allied powers quickly disintegrated, the cooperative atmosphere of the occupation of Germany turned competitive and aggressive. Although an eventual reunification of Germany had been intended, the new relationship between the Allied powers turned Germany into West versus East, democracy versus Communism.

Since the city of Berlin had been situated entirely within the Soviet zone of occupation, West Berlin became an island of democracy within Communist East Germany.

Mass Emigration

Within a short period of time after the war, living conditions in West Germany and East Germany became distinctly different. With the help and support of its occupying powers, West Germany set up a capitalist society and experienced such a rapid growth of their economy that it became known as the "economic miracle." With hard work, individuals living in West Germany were able to live well, buy gadgets and appliances, and to travel as they wished.

Nearly the opposite was true in East Germany. Since the Soviet Union had viewed their zone as a spoil of war, the Soviets pilfered factory equipment and other valuable assets from their zone and shipped them back to the Soviet Union. When East Germany became its own country, it was under the direct influence of the Soviet Union and thus a Communist society was established. In East Germany, the economy dragged and individual freedoms were severely restricted.

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By the late 1950s, many people living in East Germany wanted out. No longer able to stand the repressive living conditions of East Germany, they would pack up their bags and head to West Berlin. Although some of them would be stopped on their way, hundreds of thousands of others made it across the border. Once across, these refugees were housed in warehouses and then flown to West Germany. Many of those who escaped were young, trained professionals. By the early 1960s, East Germany was rapidly losing both its labor force and its population.

Desperate to keep its citizens, East Germany decided to build a wall to prevent them from crossing the border.

The Fall of the Berlin Wall

The fall of the Berlin Wall happened nearly as suddenly as its rise. There had been signs that the Communist bloc was weakening, but the East German Communist leaders insisted that East Germany just needed a moderate change rather than a drastic revolution. East German citizens did not agree.

As Communism began to falter in Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia in 1988 and 1989, new exodus points were opened to East Germans who wanted to flee to the West. Then suddenly, on the evening of November 9, 1989, an announcement made by East German government official Günter Schabowski stated, "Permanent relocations can be done through all border checkpoints between the GDR (East Germany) into the FRG (West Germany) or West Berlin."

People were in shock. Were the borders really open? East Germans tentatively approached the border and indeed found that the border guards were letting people cross. Very quickly, the Berlin Wall was inundated with people from both sides. Some began chipping at the Berlin Wall with hammers and chisels. There was an impromptu huge celebration along the Berlin Wall, with people hugging, kissing, singing, cheering, and crying.