

The Berlin Wall

On November 9, 1989, the wall came tumbling down. Here is its history.

Following World War II, Germany was divided, creating Soviet East Germany and West Germany. Berlin, located inside of East Germany, was also divided into East and West zones. In the late 1940s and the 1950s, crossing from East Berlin to West Berlin in Germany became a popular way to escape Soviet communism. Thousands fled Soviet control in this way, and in 1961, more than one thousand East Germans were escaping each day. In order to stop the flight which drained the trained workforce of East Germany, East German police began to construct a wall on August 13, 1961. The wall was made of concrete topped with barbed wire. East Germans continued to escape after the wall was built, but nearly two hundred died in the attempt. Border guards shot them at sight.

The wall became a symbol of the Iron Curtain, the military, political, and ideological barrier that existed between the Soviet bloc and western Europe during the Cold War.

West Berlin itself was constantly under threat of having its supplies cut off. In 1971 Britain, France, and the Soviet Union reached an agreement that provided for free movement between West Berlin and West Germany. As the seventies and eighties progressed, relations between East and West Berlin began to improve.

In 1989 communist governments were failing, and crowds of people were leaving East Germany through Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. People throughout East Germany were demanding freedom. In November of that year, the East German government succumbed, agreeing to free movement by its citizens. Consequently, the wall that had stood for nearly thirty years was opened. Thousands of people crossed the border within the first few hours of freedom. Citizens began to dismantle the wall any way they could, using picks and shovels and whatever tools were available. People climbed the wall and danced on top, and tourists came from around the world to see the wall come down. Many took home small pieces of it as a reminder of the importance of freedom.

By the end of 1989, communism in East Germany was hanging by a thread. Leaders came and went, and in 1990, communism was voted out. In October of 1990, East and West Germany became a single nation with Berlin as the capital. A few sections of the Berlin wall are still standing and have become outdoor art galleries.

Suggested Activities

Airlift In the late forties, West Berlin was cut off from its supply lines. Research to learn how long the seige lasted and what was done to support the people of Berlin.

JFK John Kennedy was president when the wall was erected. During his visit to West Berlin in 1963, he spoke in German. Find out what he said and explain what it meant to the people of Berlin.

Cartography Draw maps of Germany before and after the unification.

Read Read firsthand accounts of people who witnessed the tearing down of the wall. Newspapers around the world carried the story for weeks.

Write Write a story as though you are an East Berliner present on the day the wall is opened.