



THIS DAY IN HISTORY

STUDY GUIDE



NOV. 9, 1989: FALL OF THE BERLIN WALL

Biographies, discussion questions, suggested activities and more



GERMANY

Setting the Stage

As World War II came to an end in 1945, the Allied peace conferences at Yalta and Potsdam determined the fate of Germany's territories. They split the defeated nation into four "allied occupation zones": The eastern part of the country went to the Soviet Union, while the western part went to the United States, Great Britain and France. Even though Berlin was located entirely within the Soviet part of the country, the city was split into similar sectors. The Soviets took the eastern half, while the other Allies took the western. This four-way occupation of Berlin began in June 1945.

The existence of West Berlin, a capitalist city deep within communist East Germany, "stuck like a bone in the Soviet throat," as Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev put it. The Russians soon began maneuvering to drive the U.S., Britain and France out of the city. In 1948, a Soviet blockade of West Berlin aimed to starve the western Allies out of the city. Instead of retreating, however, the U.S. and its allies supplied their sectors of the city from the air. This effort, known as the Berlin Airlift, lasted for more than a year and delivered more than 2.3 million tons of food, fuel and other goods to West Berlin. The Soviets called off the blockade in 1949.

Tensions flared again in 1958. For the next three years, the Soviets—emboldened by the successful 1957 launch of the Sputnik satellite and embarrassed by the seemingly endless flow of refugees from east to west—blustered and made threats. Summits, conferences and other negotiations came and went without resolution. Meanwhile, the flood of refugees continued. In June 1961, some 19,000 people left the GDR through Berlin. The following month, 30,000 fled. In the first 11 days of August, 16,000 East Germans crossed the border into West Berlin, and on August 12 some 2,400 followed—the largest number of defectors ever to leave East Germany in a single day.

That night, Khrushchev gave the East German government permission to stop the flow of emigrants by closing its border for good. In just two weeks, the East German army, police force and volunteer construction workers had completed a makeshift barbed wire and concrete block wall—the Berlin Wall—that divided one side of the city from the other.

Cover photo: A picture of the Berlin Wall: the red text on it reads, "Irgendwann fällt jede Mauer" — "Sooner or later every wall falls." Source: Frederik Ramm, <http://www.remote.org/frederik/culture/berlin/tour1.html>

NOV. 9, 1989

FALL OF THE BERLIN

WALL



"No More Wars..." graffiti

On November 9, 1989, East German officials opened the Berlin Wall, allowing travel from East to West Berlin. The following day, celebrating Germans began to tear the wall down. One of the ugliest and most infamous symbols of the Cold War was soon reduced to rubble that was quickly snatched up by souvenir hunters.

Before the wall was built, Berliners on both sides of the city could move around fairly freely: They crossed the East-West border to work, to shop, to go to the theater and the movies. Trains and subway lines carried passengers back and forth. After the wall was built, it became impossible to get from East to West Berlin except through one of three checkpoints: at Helmstedt ("Checkpoint Alpha" in American

military parlance); at Dreilinden ("Checkpoint Bravo"); and in the center of Berlin at Friedrichstrasse ("Checkpoint Charlie"). Eventually, the GDR built 12 checkpoints along the wall. At each of the checkpoints, East German soldiers screened diplomats and other officials before they were allowed to enter or leave. Except under special circumstances, travelers from East and West Berlin were rarely allowed across the border.

Over time, East German officials replaced the makeshift wall with one that was sturdier and more difficult to scale. A 12-foot-tall, 4-foot-wide mass of reinforced concrete was topped with an enormous pipe that made climbing over nearly impossible. Behind the wall on the East German side was a so-called "Death Strip": a gauntlet of soft sand (to show

footprints), floodlights, vicious dogs, trip-wire machine guns and patrolling soldiers with orders to shoot escapees on sight.

In all, at least 171 people were killed trying to get over, under or around the Berlin Wall. Escape from East Germany was not impossible, however: From 1961 until the wall came down in 1989, more than 5,000 East Germans (including some 600 border guards) managed to cross the border by jumping out of windows adjacent to the wall, climbing over the barbed wire, flying in hot air balloons, crawling through the sewers and driving through unfortified parts of the wall at high speeds.

East Germany's decision to open the wall followed a decision by Hungarian officials a few weeks earlier to open the border between Hungary and Austria. This effectively ended the purpose of the Berlin Wall, since East German citizens could now circumvent it by going through Hungary, into Austria, and thence into West Germany. The decision to open the wall was also a reflection of the immense political changes taking place in East Germany, where the old communist leadership was rapidly losing power and the populace was demanding free elections and movement toward a free market system.

On November 9, 1989, a spokesman for East Berlin's Communist Party announced a change in his city's relations with the West. Starting at midnight that day, he said, citizens of the GDR were free to cross the country's borders. East and

West Berliners flocked to the wall, drinking beer and champagne and chanting "Tor auf!" ("Open the gate!"). At midnight, they flooded through the checkpoints.

More than 2 million people from East Berlin visited West Berlin that weekend to participate in a celebration that was, one journalist wrote, "the greatest street party in the history of the world." People used hammers and picks to knock away chunks of the wall—they became known as "mauerspechte," or "wall woodpeckers"—while cranes and bulldozers pulled down section after section. Soon the wall was gone and Berlin was united for the first time since 1945. "Only today," one Berliner spray-painted on a piece of the wall, "is the war really over."

After watching television coverage of the delirious German crowds demolishing the wall, U.S. President George H.W. Bush became more convinced than ever that Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's statements about desiring a new relationship with the West must be taken more seriously. Unlike 1956 and 1968, when Soviet forces ruthlessly crushed protests in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, respectively, Gorbachev actually encouraged the East German action. As such, the destruction of the Berlin Wall stands as one of the most significant steps leading to the end of the Cold War.

The reunification of East and West Germany was made official on October 3, 1990, almost one year after the fall of the Berlin Wall. □

DID YOU KNOW?

The 27-mile portion of the barrier separating Berlin into east and west consisted of two concrete walls between which was a "death strip" up to 160 yards wide that contained hundreds of watchtowers, miles of anti-vehicle trenches, guard dog runs, floodlights and trip-wire machine guns.

PEOPLE TO KNOW

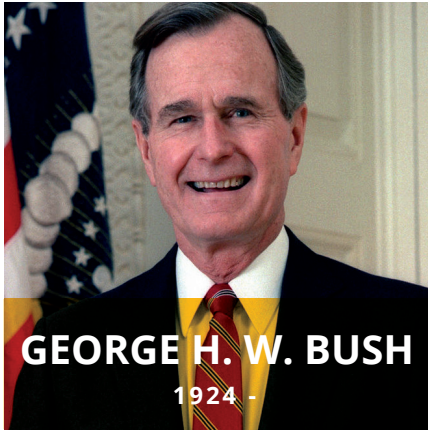


Gorbachev served as the leader of the Soviet Union in its final years, as general secretary of the Communist Party and then as president. When he became general secretary in March 1985, he launched his nation on a dramatic new course. His dual program of “perestroika” (“restructuring”) and “glasnost” (“openness”) introduced profound changes in economic practice, internal affairs and international relations. Within five years, Gorbachev’s revolutionary program swept communist governments throughout Eastern Europe from power and brought an end to the Cold War. Gorbachev’s actions also inadvertently set the stage for the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, which dissolved into 15 individual republics. On December 25, 1991, he resigned from the presidency of a nation that no longer existed.



Reagan, a former actor and California governor, served as the 40th U.S. president from 1981 to 1989. Raised in small-town Illinois, he became a Hollywood actor in his 20s and later served as the Republican governor of California from 1967 to 1975. Dubbed the Great Communicator, the affable Reagan became a popular two-term president. He cut taxes, increased defense spending, negotiated a nuclear arms reduction agreement with the Soviets and is credited with helping to speed the end of the Cold War with the Soviet Union. During his second term, Reagan forged a diplomatic relationship with the reform-minded Mikhail Gorbachev, who became leader of the Soviet Union in 1985. In 1987, the Americans and Soviets signed a historic agreement to eliminate intermediate-range nuclear missiles. That same year, Reagan spoke at Germany’s Berlin Wall, a symbol of communism, and famously challenged Gorbachev to tear it down. Twenty-nine months later, Gorbachev allowed the people of Berlin to dismantle the wall. After leaving the White House, Reagan returned to Germany in September 1990—just weeks before Germany was officially reunified—and took several symbolic swings with a hammer at a remaining chunk of the wall. Reagan, who survived a 1981 assassination attempt, died at age 93 after battling Alzheimer’s disease.

PEOPLE TO KNOW



Bush served as the 41st U.S. president from 1989 to 1993. He also was a two-term U.S. vice president under Ronald Reagan, from 1981 to 1989. Bush, a World War II naval aviator and Texas oil industry executive, began his political career in the U.S. House of Representatives in 1967. During the 1970s, he held a variety of government posts, including CIA director. A key focus of Bush's presidency was foreign policy. He began his time in the White House as Germany was in the process of reunifying, the Soviet Union was collapsing and the Cold War was ending. Bush would be credited with helping to improve U.S.-Soviet relations. He met with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, and in July 1991, the two men signed the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty. He also launched successful military operations against Panama and Iraq; however, his popularity at home was marred by an economic recession, and in 1992 he lost his bid for re-election to Bill Clinton.

SEE IT



Guards at Berlin's Brandenburg Gate on the day the wall was erected, August 13, 1961



Checkpoint Charlie on the night the wall fell. Credit: Deutsches Bundesarchiv



Graffiti at the Berlin Wall. Credit: Panterdesign

CONCURRENT EVENTS



EXXON VALDEZ

The supertanker Exxon Valdez, owned and operated by the Exxon Corporation, ran aground on a reef in Prince William Sound in southern Alaska in March 1989, causing one of the worst oil spills in U.S. history. An estimated 11 million gallons of oil eventually spilled into the water. Attempts to contain the massive spill were unsuccessful, and wind and currents spread the oil more than 100 miles from its source, eventually polluting more than 700 miles of coastline. Hundreds of thousands of birds and animals were adversely affected by the environmental disaster. Exxon was condemned by the National Transportation Safety Board and in early 1991 agreed under pressure from environmental groups to pay a penalty of \$100 million and provide \$1 billion over a 10-year period for the cost of the cleanup. However, later in the year, both Alaska and Exxon rejected the agreement, and in October 1991 the oil giant settled the matter by paying \$25 million, less than 4 percent of the cleanup aid it had promised earlier that year.



TIANANMEN SQUARE

In May 1989, nearly a million Chinese, mostly young students, crowded into central Beijing to protest for greater democracy and call for the resignations of Chinese Communist Party leaders deemed too repressive. For nearly three weeks, the protesters kept up daily vigils, and marched and chanted. Western reporters captured much of the drama for television and newspaper audiences in the United States and Europe. On June 4, 1989, however, Chinese troops and security police stormed through Tiananmen Square, firing indiscriminately into the crowds of protesters. Turmoil ensued, as tens of thousands of the young students tried to escape the rampaging Chinese forces. Other protesters fought back, stoning the attacking troops and overturning and setting fire to military vehicles. Reporters and Western diplomats on the scene estimated that at least 300, and perhaps thousands, of the protesters had been killed and as many as 10,000 were arrested. The savagery of the Chinese government's attack shocked both its allies and Cold War enemies. Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev declared that he was saddened by the events in China. He said he hoped that the government would adopt his own domestic reform program and begin to democratize the Chinese political system. In the United States, editorialists and members of Congress denounced the Tiananmen Square massacre and pressed for President George Bush to punish the Chinese government. A little more than three weeks later, the U.S. Congress voted to impose economic sanctions against the People's Republic of China in response to the brutal violation of human rights.



INVASION OF PANAMA

In December 1989, the United States invaded Panama in an attempt to overthrow military dictator Manuel Noriega, who had been indicted in the United States on drug trafficking charges and was accused of suppressing democracy in Panama and endangering U.S. nationals. Noriega's Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF) were promptly crushed, forcing the dictator to seek asylum with the Vatican in Vatican City, where he surrendered on January 3, 1990. On January 3, Noriega was arrested by U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency agents. Some 150 PDF soldiers were killed along with an estimated 500 Panamanian civilians and 23 U.S. soldiers during the invasion. The Organization of American States and the European parliament both formally protested the invasion, which they condemned as a flagrant violation of international law. In 1992, Noriega was found guilty on eight counts of drug trafficking, racketeering and money laundering, marking the first time in history that a U.S. jury convicted a foreign leader of criminal charges. He was sentenced to 40 years in federal prison, but after extradition to and incarceration in Panama, Noriega died in a Panama City hospital in 2017.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



Death strip and graffiti on the Wall, 1986

1

How do you think you would feel if a wall was suddenly built across your town or city? How would it affect your life?

2

When it was built, President John F. Kennedy described the wall as "a hell of a lot better than a war." Do you agree?

3

What emotions do you think East Berliners experienced when they found out that the wall was going to come down?

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES



A crane removes a section of the Berlin Wall, December, 1989

SLIDING DOORS

Diving deeper into Discussion Question #1, discuss as a class what ordinary Berliners would have experienced when they suddenly no longer had access to half of their city. Then, ask students to write two diary entries in the voice of a Berlin student after the division of Berlin in August 1961. In the first, they should imagine they are an East Berliner; in the second, they should take on the voice of a West Berliner.

I WAS THERE

Have students imagine that they are reporters covering the fall of the Berlin Wall. After researching the events, ask them to prepare written or audio “dispatches” covering this timeline of events (1) Hungary’s decision to open the border with Austria (2) East Germany’s announcement that they would open East Berlin (3) the first people crossing into West Berlin that midnight (4) the “street party” that ensued for the next several days. The dispatches should be made in the first person as if the student is actually there, and include factual details about the events as well as the reactions of ordinary citizens.

GRAFFITI

In the days after the fall of the wall, Berliners and others flocked to the wall to break off souvenir pieces. They also drew pictures and wrote messages, many of them reflecting their feelings about the wall and its removal. Use a long roll of brown butcher paper to simulate the wall. Then ask students to write a message or quotation or draw a picture that they feel adequately expresses how Berliners must have felt about the wall or their reaction in the days after the wall fell.

RESOURCES

Video: Deconstructing History: The Berlin Wall

<http://www.history.com/topics/cold-war/berlin-wall/videos/berlin-airlift>

Video: Kennedy responds to the Berlin Wall

<http://www.history.com/topics/cold-war/berlin-wall/videos/kennedy-responds-to-berlin-wall>

Audio: Reagan’s “Tear Down This Wall” speech

<http://www.history.com/speeches/reagan-demands-fall-of-berlin-wall>

Audio: Bush’s Mainz speech

<http://www.history.com/topics/cold-war/berlin-wall/speeches/bush-calls-for-glasnost-in-east-berlin>

Text: President Ronald Reagan’s “Tear Down This Wall” speech

<https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2007/summer/berlin.html>

Text: President George H.W. Bush’s speech calling for wall’s destruction

<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=17085>

Video: News coverage of the fall of the Berlin Wall

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fK1MwhEDjHg>

Video: News coverage: Celebration at the Berlin Wall

<https://youtu.be/snsdDb7KDkg>