

HISTORY This Week EP 416: The Cold War Gets A Wall EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

NOTE: This transcript may contain errors.

Sally Helm: HISTORY This Week. February 22, 1962. I'm Sally Helm.

An excited German woman rushes up to the motorcade and hands Robert Kennedy a bouquet of flowers. The US Attorney General has been dispatched to West Berlin by his brother, President John F. Kennedy—JFK. And now hundreds of thousands of people have turned out to hear what RFK has to say. Kids run alongside his car as it moves through a crowd ten-people-deep. They shout “Bobby! Bobby!” and wave whatever cloth they have on hand. Handkerchiefs or towels, tablecloths or flags.

There's a reason for their passion. West Berlin is a tiny bastion of American and Western influence smack in the middle of East Germany. Which is a communist country. It's been controlled by the Soviet Union since the end of World War II. And about six months ago, West Berliners woke up to a new and troubling feature in their city. A wall. Circling all around them. Keeping them in...and East Germans out.

It's the front line of the Cold War. And today, at Berlin's City Hall, Bobby Kennedy denounces the wall. He stands in the bitter cold, before an even bigger crowd, and says that the wall is a symbol of failure of the “bad dream” that is Communism.

And then, just as he's saying this...there's a sudden disturbance. What look like big balloons shoot up above the crowd. Everyone looks towards them. And then...the balloons explode.

A white parachute emerges from each of them, each attached to a big Soviet-red flag. About four feet by four feet. It's a silent, ominous greeting from the East.

Bobby Kennedy stops his speech. He improvises.

“The Communists will let the balloons through,” he says. “But they won't let their people through!” The crowd cheers. RFK says East German leader Walter Ulbricht has built that wall because he fears comparison to the West. Kennedy says democratic West Germany is flourishing, and despotic East Germany is not, and so, Kennedy adds: “that is the true meaning of the wall that lies like a snake across the heart of your city. Mr. Ulbricht and the Communists cannot have the contrast.”

The crowd cheers again...although many suspect that their nightmare won't be ending any time soon.

Today: The Berlin Wall. How did it become ground zero in the fierce global propaganda war between the United States and the Soviet Union? And why did it take so long for the wall to come down?

[AD BREAK]

Sally Helm: 1945. The end of World War II.

Getty Archival: *In a ceremony symbolic of the complete destruction of Nazi Germany, the Nazi swastika is blotted out by the Stars and Stripes.*

Sally Helm: Allied troops march across Germany, victorious.

Getty Archival: *Germany at long last is smashed.*

Sally Helm: The Western Allies and the Soviet Union have done the smashing. After the war, they divide Germany up like a pie. They cut it from top to bottom. The Western part of the country is split between the US, the UK, and France. It'll be a democratic, capitalist zone. The Eastern part is occupied by the Soviets. It's going to be communist.

And there's one important extra detail. It has to do with Berlin, Germany's capital.

Hope Harrison: **The city of Berlin was also divided between east and west.**

Sally Helm: Hope Harrison is a history professor at George Washington University, and author of the book, *Driving the Soviets up the Wall*. She told us, the Allied countries controlled West Berlin. And the Soviets held East Berlin.

And here's what's *really* odd about the situation. The city of Berlin sits in the northeast corner of the country – squarely inside East Germany.

Getty Archival: *The iron curtain comes down in Germany in such a way that the city of Berlin now lies deep within the Soviet zone.*

Hope Harrison: **So west Berlin was located 110 miles inside of communist East Germany.**

Sally Helm: And that's a precarious position for West Berlin. Because in the years after Germany is carved up, a feud breaks out. It pits countries from the West, led by the United States, against the Soviet Union. The two sides had been allies during World War II, but now they're enemies. With competing economic systems. Competing ideologies. Competing militaries. Sitting nose to nose in the capital of Germany.

Hope Harrison: **They rubbed up against each other within the city of Berlin. It was the center of the cold war.**

Sally Helm: The Soviets' first attempt to push the Allies out of Berlin is in 1948. They cut off food and supply lines to the west part of the city... but the Allies get around it using planes. After the so-called Berlin Airlift, the Soviets back off.

But by 1952, tensions are flaring again. The West has consolidated its zone into a new nation, called West Germany. Which is a more powerful state than the Soviets wanted on their border. And in fact, they have *closed* that border. To keep East German citizens from crossing over to the West.

Hope Harrison: **That meant that after 1952, the only open border for Germans to go back and forth between communism in the east and democracy and capitalism in the west, was through Berlin.**

Sally Helm: Berlin is now the only window East Germans have into life on the other side. That allows them to judge which way of life is better.

Hope Harrison: Because people can go back and forth and see the difference between the systems, the Soviet leaders and the American leaders, all felt that their system had to show that it was better in Berlin.

Sally Helm: This puts a heavy load of pressure on the leader of the East German state: Walter Ulbricht.

Hope Harrison: So, Walter Ulbricht was really focused, not just on setting up an east German communist state, but on ultimately preserving his own power as the leader of that state.

Sally Helm: Ulbricht has a high-pitched, squeaky voice, and stands at just five foot four inches. He has glasses. A little goatee. As *The New York Times* puts it, he has "the look of a small-town dignitary who has stumbled into the big world and is determined to hide his confusion."

But Ulbricht also has that classic German discipline. He starts each day with 10 minutes of calisthenics. He's known to never laugh or smile. And he's serious about his communism. Like many German communists, he'd fled to the Soviet Union during the war, to avoid Nazi persecution.

Hope Harrison: He was in Moscow, being trained in how to set up a communist regime and becoming closer and closer to the Soviet leaders.

Sally Helm: Ulbricht wants to turn East Germany into a strong, vibrant, communist state. But now Ulbricht has a big problem in Berlin. American newsreels describe it in the starkest terms they can conjure up.

Getty Archival: *The contrast with life in West Berlin is readily evident.*

Hope Harrison: They didn't have as many lights. So, it was dark compared to the west. But also, colors, it was gray and dull.

Getty Archival: *The streets in the communist part of the city are drab and almost deserted. The shop windows almost empty.*

Hope Harrison: East Germans were able to go into west Berlin, they would see the shops filled with goods, which they weren't in the east. They would see newspaper kiosks with a free press.

Getty Archival: *Here the East German refugees get their first uncensored news of the world.*

Hope Harrison: They could see movies, Hollywood movies. And in fact, the west set up movie theaters right near the border.

Getty Archival: *Dozens of little stands have been set up near the sector border to satisfy the craving of the East Berliners for such commodities as soap.*

Sally Helm: Soap. You couldn't get good soap in East Berlin. Or fashionable clothing. There are also regular shortages of food.

Getty Archival: *Small wonder that the people of East Berlin seize every opportunity to visit or seek refuge in West Berlin.*

Sally Helm: By 1953, so many East Germans are crossing into West Berlin that Communist authorities threaten to stop trains moving from East to West.

Getty Archival: *The only effect of this threat was to intensify the panic among the East Germans and increase the flow of refugees to a peak. At one point of more than 3000 persons a day.*

Sally Helm: And then in June, tens of thousands of East Germans revolt against their system of government. Protestors take to the streets and raise a chant against Ulbricht and other East German leaders. Roughly translated: "Goatee, paunch and spectacles, the people find rejectable!"

Hope Harrison: That uprising was put down by the Soviets with troops and tanks. And after that Walter Ulbricht always felt really nervous. This could happen again. And so, he wanted to crack down.

Sally Helm: He trains his attention on the open border in Berlin. It's a loophole in the Communist system of control.

Hope Harrison: And in fact, that is exactly what Ulbricht called it. He kept pressing the Soviets. Let me close this loophole. I need to close this loophole in Berlin and stop people from escaping.

Sally Helm: Ulbricht is determined to fully and finally separate the people of East and West Berlin. He soon takes it all the way up to the leader of the Soviet Communist Party, Nikita Khrushchev. But Khrushchev has a different idea.

Hope Harrison: Ulbricht was the pragmatist. I would say Khrushchev was more of a dreamer.

Sally Helm: In the mid-50s, Khrushchev has just taken over the Soviet Communist Party. Compared to Ulbricht, Khrushchev is a vibrant personality. He's also prone to emotional outbursts. Like, there's a widely repeated story about a United Nations meeting when Khrushchev was talking about the superiority of the Soviet system and emphasized the point by removing his shoe and repeatedly banging it on a table.

Hope Harrison: Khrushchev had this boundless optimism in communism. He just thought this is absolutely the way of the future. This brought me up from, you know, my family life as peasants. It was the communist red army that largely defeated Hitler in World War II. The west came in very late.

Sally Helm: Khrushchev overrules Ulbricht's request to crack down hard.

Hope Harrison: Saying, you know, you're being too harsh, you've got to moderate your policies.

Sally Helm: He sends Ulbricht the message, *instead of responding to the people with more restrictions... remind them of the beauty of the system.* And he sweetens the deal.

Hope Harrison: Khrushchev began giving him more and more economic aid.

Sally Helm: If troops and tanks are the stick, then the carrot is clothing and soap. Maybe *now* the East German citizens will quiet down.

But...when it comes to providing consumer goods, the East just can't compete with the capitalist west. People are still going hungry. And more and more of them are crossing the border into West Berlin. Between February and May 1960, the number of refugees more than doubles. Ulbricht has had enough.

Hope Harrison: Ulbricht was not a dreamer. He's like, *yeah, yeah, you know, communism is wonderful, but guess what? My people are leaving. I need to stop that.* Ulbricht followed a two-prong strategy, basically. On the one hand, he was constantly bombarding Khrushchev with phone calls, with letters, and in their meetings, you know, talking, *you've got to help me. You've got to close the border*, but he also, in spite of the fact that Khrushchev kept telling him point blank, *do not act unilaterally in Berlin*, Ulbricht started preparing things.

Sally Helm: He appoints a top-secret committee to figure out how to stop the droves of people who are fleeing the East. But remember, this is against Khrushchev's orders. Khrushchev isn't ready to resort to a drastic step.

Hope Harrison: He later wrote in his memoirs look, you know, *I knew everyone would stay, what kind of a great system is this if you have to build a wall to keep your people in? He knew they would look terrible if they closed the border in Berlin.*

Sally Helm: Instead, Khrushchev takes a different tack: international diplomacy. The United States has elected a new president. John F. Kennedy. And Khrushchev wants something from Kennedy.

Hope Harrison: To try to get the west out of West Berlin that's what Khrushchev wanted. He figured if the US British and French forces leave west Berlin it'll become weak.

Sally Helm: A weak West Berlin without Western troops could maybe be folded into East Germany and absorbed into the Soviet sphere. So, Khrushchev reaches out to Kennedy's people and says, *let's talk.*

Hope Harrison: Khrushchev and Kennedy met in Vienna in a summit in June of 1961.

Sally Helm: On the surface, the meeting is cordial. No shoe banging. But there's at least one very tense moment. When Khrushchev basically tells Kennedy that he's *got* to get western troops out of West Berlin.

Hope Harrison: President Kennedy said *no way, we are not leaving. Our reputation is riding on Europeans feeling that essentially that we have their back. We are not leaving*, and Khrushchev said, *well then, you know, there may be war because we insist.*

Sally Helm: When Kennedy gets back to Washington, he tells his brother Bobby, the attorney general, that negotiating with Khrushchev is like "dealing with dad: all give and no take."

At the summit, Kennedy stands firm. But privately...he worries about dark outcomes if he and Khrushchev don't stop playing chicken over Berlin. After all, both sides have nuclear weapons.

Hope Harrison: I mean basically, there was no way—if the Soviets just attacked militarily West Berlin, there was no way the US could prevail unless it resorted to nuclear weapons. Which, you know, it was pretty tough. Nobody wanted to risk nuclear war, but you never knew sort of how far can you push it?

Sally Helm: Around the world, newspapers are running anxious articles about how to survive a nuclear attack. It feels like someone is slowly turning the handle on a diabolical jack-in-the-box, and everyone's just waiting for it to pop.

Hope Harrison: Well, you can imagine the impact of this on the east Germans who wanted to leave. There's a word in German called "torschlusspanik," which is all one word, but it's three words. It's panic of the door, closing and that's what many east Germans had. So, after that failed summit in the weeks that followed over one thousand east Germans were leaving every single day, going to West Berlin.

Sally Helm: Khrushchev's strategy...has backfired. Instead of getting Western troops out of Berlin, his hardball tactics are risking war. And that is only *increasing* the exodus of East Germans. So, in July, Khrushchev finally agrees to a tactic that he has long rejected. He asks his military commander in Berlin to assess the possibility of closing the border. The commander returns with two options: Shut off air traffic to West Berlin. Or seal the border on the ground—the option Ulbricht has been pushing. Khrushchev chooses option two.

Hope Harrison: So Soviet and East German military officials started drawing up the plans to seal the border.

Sally Helm: Ulbricht springs into action. His secret committee has already figured out how to cut off streets, railroads and subways that connect East and West Berlin. But he wonders how best to quickly divide the city. *Barbed wire*, he decides, *we'll use barbed wire. And we'll need to roll it out at just the right moment.*

Hope Harrison: They decided to do it on a weekend in August when lots of people were at their little cottage their dacha outside of Berlin, you know, when people wouldn't be paying a lot of attention.

Sally Helm: Still, the move is sure to spark a public response. Soviet troops start arriving in Berlin to back up the East German troops already there. By early August, everything is ready.

[AD BREAK]

Sally Helm: Picture your city, or your county or your town. You know people living all over – some close by, some further away. Your family and friends. Your doctor. Your dentist. The person who gives you a haircut. When you want to see them, you go where they are, or they come to you, or you meet somewhere in between. It's all just part of the rhythm of your life. The routine freedom of movement that you take for granted. That's what Berlin was like in 1961.

Hope Harrison: It was one city. You lived in one part, you, maybe you worked in the other part, maybe your brother, maybe your fiancé was in the other part. Maybe you were going to university at the other part, your job.

Sally Helm: But then you wake one summer Sunday morning to find a 96-mile barbed-wire wall rising up from the ground.

Hope Harrison: that's what they saw, construction workers backed up with soldiers, barbed wire going across streets so the east Berliners in the west Berliners were completely shocked. They're like, what is going on?

Sally Helm: What's going on is: there are places you can no longer go and people you won't be seeing anymore. Your life as you've known it is over. That is what it's like to wake up in Berlin on the morning of August 13th, 1961.

Hope Harrison: Some people absolutely were gathering at the border waving to their loved ones on the other side, screaming at the guards, the construction troops building the wall.

Sally Helm: The move is so shocking that it's hard for Berliners to comprehend. It's like it can't be real.

Hope Harrison: Most of them thought, there's no way this is going to last, and many of them where certain President Kennedy will not allow this.

Sally Helm: West Berliners are saying to themselves, *President Kennedy won't let the Soviet Union shut us up in a barbed wire cage...will he? He won't accept that our friends and family living on the East side of Berlin...are just stuck there?*

Kennedy, meanwhile, is on vacation.

Hope Harrison: Up at the family compound and he was sailing, and he came back in and that's when he learned.

Sally Helm: Kennedy and his advisors had known that Khrushchev would make a move. He had to stop the flow of defectors from East Berlin. It was getting embarrassing.

Hope Harrison: This refugee Exodus is quite dramatic the communists are going to need to shut this down somehow, how are they going to shut it down?

Sally Helm: Turns out...with a wall. So now Kennedy's confronting a new provocation.

Hope Harrison: And what he said to one of his closest aides, privately was a wall is a hell of a lot better than a war. Because Kennedy and others in the west had been very worried. Like, where is this going?

Sally Helm: In response to the wall, Kennedy at first...says nothing. He needs to figure out a way to condemn Khrushchev's action without provoking a military response.

Hope Harrison: You know, might they attack west Berlin and then might that all lead to World War III because that's where everyone thought, World War III would begin was in Berlin.

Sally Helm: So, Kennedy moves carefully. Takes his time.

Hope Harrison: It took several days till they sent a formal note of protest, which for the Berliners was like, are you kidding me? That's it?

Sally Helm: That is, it. For now. Even though, in Berlin, things go from bad to worse. Within days, East German workers begin replacing the barbed wire with concrete. On Walter Ulbricht's orders.

Hope Harrison: He was very frustrated. You know, the whole point was to stop people from leaving. So, the barbed wire wasn't completely doing that. His military chiefs said, yeah, but a wall can cast shadows. It'll be a little bit harder to see people and he insisted it has to be a wall.

Sally Helm: The message is clear: this is a permanent barrier. And Berliners in the East and West are also coming to realize.... that Kennedy will not be saving them.

Hope Harrison: Heartbroken, shocked, angry, trapped, trapped.

Sally Helm: Trapped. It's as good a word as any to describe the Cold War. The United States and the Soviet Union are trapped in a dangerous struggle for power and influence. The playing field is global. Allies and proxies on both sides are caught up. And overhanging all of it is nuclear Armageddon... the millions of people, mostly civilians, who will die if cities are targeted. Cities like Berlin.

Hope Harrison: The US and the Soviet Union felt they each had their own sphere of influence. And in order to avoid an escalation to nuclear war, you just did not mess with the other side's sphere of influence.

Sally Helm: So, President Kennedy does not take military action against the wall.

Instead, he, and the presidents who follow him, oppose it mainly on two fronts: diplomatic and symbolic. That's why, within a year, JFK sends his brother RFK to stand in West Berlin and pledge American support... after mocking the pro-Soviet propagandists and their exploding balloon rockets.

A little more than a year later, in June 1963, JFK himself stands at the wall and delivers the now well-known line:

Getty Archival: *As a free man, I take pride in the words, Ich bin ein Berliner.*

Sally Helm: *I am a Berliner*, he's saying. *I am with you.* The crowd of over a million West Germans erupts into applause.

Getty Archival: *[applause]*

Sally Helm: It's a hopeful moment... but eclipsed by the grim reality in Berlin. The wall takes its first casualty just over a week after it goes up. A woman dies trying to cross from East to West. And over time, one wall becomes two, separated by a "death strip" up to 160 yards wide. It's studded with towers and floodlights. Strewed with tripwires. Patrolled by armed guards who shoot to kill. Over the decades, some East Germans will figure out how to escape by swimming across canals or by stowing away in the trunks of cars driven by friends from the West, who were allowed to come and go freely. But hundreds will also die trying. Not only that...

Hope Harrison: 77,000 people were arrested over those 28 years for trying to escape or being suspected of trying to escape or having helped someone to escape. It was a crime.

Getty Archival: *These people are risking their very lives to taste something we too often take for granted. Liberty.*

Sally Helm: Decades later, in 1987, another US president travels to Berlin. President Ronald Reagan has a demand for Soviet premier Mikhail Gorbachev.

Reagan Archival: *Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!*

Sally Helm: Mr. Gorbachev *has* been reforming the Soviet Union... but he does *not* tear down the wall. That happens two years later, in 1989. The wall comes down peacefully, at the hands of the people of East and West Germany.

Berlin Wall falling Archival: *[cheers/hammering]*

Sally Helm: If the Soviet Union was a house, the Berlin Wall was a crucial part of it. You could say it was a load-bearing wall. When it fell, it left the Soviet state gravely weakened.

It's the beginning of the end of the Cold War. So of course, there was rejoicing.

Cheer Archival: *[cheers/applause]*

But Hope Harrison says, it wasn't all joyous for the Germans who'd been forced for so long to live with the wall... and the suffering that came with it.

Hope Harrison: You know, the people who lost a loved one who was killed at the wall, the fall of the wall for them was this incredible bittersweet thing, because I'm the one hand they felt, you know,

wow, thank God. You know, the wall is down. But on the other hand, they feel, this happened way too late, you know, for my son who was killed, trying to escape.

Sally Helm: Today, Berlin—and Germany—are united. But about a mile of the wall has been left standing here and there, as a memorial. A reminder that something as impossible as a 96-mile wall going up overnight—in the crucible of the Cold War, with its symbolic battles backed by nuclear weapons—in that context, it happened. And something like it could always happen again.

(CREDITS)

Sally Helm: Thanks for listening to History This Week. For more moments throughout history that are also worth watching, check your local TV listings to find out what's on the History Channel today. If you want to get in touch, please shoot us an email at our email address, HistoryThisWeek@History.com, or you can leave us a voicemail: 212-351-0410.

Special thanks to Hope Harrison, professor of history and international affairs at George Washington University and the author of *Driving the Soviets up the Wall: Soviet-East German Relations, 1953-1961*. Harrison's most recent book starts where our story ends: it's called, *After the Berlin Wall: Memory and the Making of the New Germany, 1989 to the Present*. Thanks also to Andreas Daum, author of *Kennedy in Berlin*. Archival materials courtesy of A+E Networks.

This episode was produced by Julia Press and co-produced by Morgan Givens. It was story edited by Jim O'Grady and sound designed by Dan Rosato. HISTORY This Week is also produced by Corinne Wallace, and me, Sally Helm. Our associate producer is Emma Fredericks. Our senior producer is Ben Dickstein. Our supervising producer is McCamey Lynn, and our executive producer is Jessie Katz.

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