

This Day in History... August 13, 1961

Work Begins on the Berlin Wall

Shortly after midnight on August 13, 1961, East German soldiers laid barbed wire and bricks, creating the Berlin Wall.

When the Nazis were defeated in World War II, Germany was divided into two countries. The German Democratic Republic in the East was part of the communist Soviet Bloc, while the Federal Republic of Germany was aligned with Western Europe. The capital city of Berlin was technically part of the Soviet zone, but was split as well. The Soviets attempted to blockade the Allied-supported western half of the city, but the Berlin airlift foiled those plans.

Soon the oppressed in East Germany traveled west to find better opportunities. Over the course of 12 years, some 3 million people made the journey. To prevent additional defectors, the East German communist leader ordered a wall to be built between East and West Berlin. Work on the wall began on August 13, 1961 and it eventually rose to be 10 feet high and extended 100 miles. Suddenly, the people of Berlin were cut off from their friends and families on the other side of the wall.

A physical representation of the “Iron Curtain,” the Berlin Wall was a daily reminder to citizens of East Berlin of their government’s brutality. The wall was known around the world as a symbol of the communist government. It quickly became a symbol of the Cold War and was the site of frequent protests and continued escape attempts. At least 100 people died trying to get across this barrier to freedom.



In 1963, President Kennedy visited the wall and celebrated West Berlin as a symbol of freedom against tyranny.

By the 1980s, the Soviet Union started to crumble economically and politically. Protesters took to the streets of East Germany beginning in September 1989. On a Monday evening, thousands of East Germans poured into a square near the St. Nicholas Church in Leipzig to show their opposition to the communist rule of their German Democratic Republic government. Surrounded by police and government troops, some 70,000 protesters held a candlelight vigil. They returned the following Monday, and the Monday after that, and their number grew. Remarkably, the protesters were armed with only one thing – a chant that spoke to all of us: “*Wir sind das Volk! Wir sind ein Volk! Deutsche Einheit!*” (“We are the people! We are one people! German unification!”) The chant grew louder, the news spread – and so did the dream of democracy.



Fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989

The “Peaceful Revolution” lasted for two months. On November 9, the government announced that crossing points would be opened along the border for anyone who wanted to leave the country. Crowds soon gathered at checkpoints, and the border guards, who hadn’t been given clear instructions, let people through the gates without checking identification.

In the weeks that followed, citizens from both sides of Germany became “wall woodpeckers” – they came to the wall with chisels and chipped off a piece as a souvenir. Soon the holes were large enough that Germans walked through them.

During the next year, negotiations took place to work out the details for a unified Germany. The five states that made up East Germany became part of the Federal Republic of Germany. On October 3, 1990, the Treaty on the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany went into effect, and the following month free elections were held throughout all of Germany for the first time since 1932.



During the Berlin Airlift, the US and allies delivered food and supplies to blockaded West Berlin.



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