The Berlin Wall: everything you need to know

22-28 minutes

Please note: This article contains images some readers may find distressing

It is just over 30 years since the fall of the Berlin Wall, East Germany’s concrete solution to the mass haemorrhaging of its citizens to the west across the open border of West Berlin at the height of the Cold War. For 28 years following the fateful border closure on Sunday 13 August 1961, the edifice which inspired the novels of John le Carré and Len Deighton had become a fixture in the Cold War landscape, threatening death to any daring to cross it.

• An audacious bid to tunnel under the Berlin Wall

Why was the Berlin Wall built?

In the 1950s, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) – that part of Germany which had been the Soviet Occupation Zone in the post-WW2 division of Germany – was threatening to bleed dry, as one in six people fled, usually in search of work under West Germany’s ‘economic miracle’ (but in some cases fleeing political or religious persecution). The GDR desperately wanted to halt this so-called ‘brain-drain’, so in August 1961 the East German communists were given the go-ahead by Moscow to close the border and build a physical barrier. The fact that the west did not officially recognise the so-called ‘GDR’, coupled with the risks of escalation, meant that the decision could only come from the Kremlin.

The Berlin Wall turned the usual function of walls – to keep people out – on its head; this wall was solely to keep its citizens in.
West Berliners peer over the Berlin Wall into East Berlin following its construction in 1961. (Photo by Paul Schutzer/The LIFE Picture Collection via Getty Images)

• In pictures: remembering the Berlin Wall 30 years on

What was life like in East Berlin before the Wall? What events led to the Wall being built?

In 1952 East Germany had sealed its mainland border to West Germany, along the river Elbe and in the mountains of the Harz, with barbed wire and fire zones (where all vegetation was cut back within 100m of the border to allow guards an unencumbered field of fire). But there was an unpluggable leak in the centre of the GDR, in the four-power city of Berlin, whose three western sectors were still protected by the US, Britain and France under post-war agreements which Moscow was unwilling to flout.

• Did the Cold War ever really end?

The Soviets had already tried to force the Western powers out during the Blockade of 1948–49 but were foiled by the famous Anglo-American airlift. The communists closed the sector boundary temporarily after the abortive insurrection in East Germany in June 1953, but within weeks it was open again.

So, throughout the 1950s East Germans could simply walk across from East Berlin. Underground trains still rumbled below. Once across East Germans, who might otherwise have feared
being stopped at the overland border, could fly over it from Tempelhof in the US sector out to the Federal Republic.

Day-trippers could come and visit the neon delights of West Berlin, buying the latest records and maybe even a pair of jeans, before disappearing back east. By 1961 there were also around 60,000 so-called Grenzgänger, Cold War commuters who lived in one half of the city and worked in the other, many of them women members of the 'scrubbing-brush brigade', working the grey economy for a few hard deutschmarks. Some young East Germans had even learnt to play the border, for instance young men targeted for military service, who 'contaminated' themselves with a short stay in the west.

West Berlin was also the base for dozens of Western espionage agencies, exploiting its position behind the Iron Curtain. The CIA and Britain's SIS (Secret Intelligence Service) appeared in the mid-1950s to have pulled off one of the Cold War's biggest signals intelligence coups with their eavesdropping tunnel under the sector boundary to tap Soviet cable traffic, until it was revealed that the KGB, the Soviet Union's intelligence agency, had known all along through their MI6 super-mole, George Blake.

- The secret history of the Berlin Wall
Western intelligence also interviewed thousands of defectors arriving at the Marienfelde transit camp. Little did they know that one of their own German associates, Görtz Schlicht, was a Stasi double-agent – no wonder Berlin became known as the city of spies and counter-spies! When the leader of the Soviet Union Nikita Khrushchev threatened the four-power status of the city with his famous Ultimatum in 1958 – which gave the western powers six months to vacate the city before turning it over to the East Germans as part of their rightful capital – the west, and the US in particular, dug in their heels once again. By 1961 the new US president, John F Kennedy, was even threatening nuclear retaliation if West Berlin were touched.

The GDR had therefore run out of ‘territorial’ options to stop the brain-drain by 1961. The Volkspolizei could not pull every suspected defector off trains headed for Berlin; the Stasi could not investigate every tip-off; and it was clear that West Berlin would not be negotiated off the geopolitical map. A more simple but drastic solution was needed. At a press conference in June East German leader Walter Ulbricht famously reassured journalists that “no-one has the intention to build a wall”. Whether this was a Freudian slip (no correspondent had asked about a wall!) or a Machiavellian ploy to encourage a stampede for the exit, it had the desired effect. To halt the exodus that was filling western transit camps to capacity, the East German communists were finally permitted by Moscow to close the border in August 1961 and build a physical barrier.
The physical barrier was constructed from August 1961. (Photo by Jung/ullstein bild via Getty Images)

**What was the Berlin Wall made from?**

In a top-secret operation, observing radio silence, East German police and militia established a human cordon all along the margins of West Berlin. East German troops formed a second echelon and Soviet army units a third. Assured by their Stasi forward observers in West Berlin that the western military presence would not react, the border forces went from erecting provisional wire-mesh fences to a more solid breeze-block wall, topped with barbed wire.

Western commentators, including West Berlin’s mayor Willy Brandt, immediately drew parallels with Nazi concentration camps. The early wooden guard towers looked all-too like something from the recent past. Indeed, Willi Seifert, commander of the GDR’s interior troops tasked with erecting the barrier, had himself been a concentration camp inmate under the Nazis.

The early wooden guard towers of the Berlin Wall drew parallels with Nazi concentration camps. (Photo by Keystone/Hulton Archive/Getty Images)

The GDR portrayed it as a border that saved the peace, even filming spy dramas such as *For Eyes Only* (1963) which tried to convince eastern viewers that NATO had been planning a pre-emptive strike on East Germany. Few were convinced. When US
President Kennedy visited the Wall that year he was visibly shocked, changing parts of his famous “Ich bin ein Berliner” speech at the last minute to underline the west’s bleak view of the ‘Wall of shame’.

**How long was the Berlin Wall?**

All told, the border installations around West Berlin zig-zagged for 163 kilometres, or just over 100 miles. Around 100km of this was covered by an actual wall, mainly at the inner-city interface, with another 50 or more kilometres made up of heavy wire mesh around West Berlin’s green border with the Brandenburg countryside. Mines were sown in the ground or strung along certain sections of fencing, not removed until the 1980s.
Border installations around West Berlin zig-zagged for 163 kilometres, or just over 100 miles. (Photo by Robert Lackenbach/The LIFE Images Collection via Getty Images/ Getty Images)

The remainder of the border was made up of existing cemetery walls or house facades, including the sinister bricked-up windows along the Bernauer Straße. In the mid-1960s the structure was modernised, and received an anti-grip tube along its top, before becoming the final 'Border Wall 75' in the mid-1970s, when a series
of L-shaped, pre-fabricated monoliths regularised its appearance. At 3.6 metres tall, it had been scientifically demonstrated by a troop of East German army athletes to be unscalable and unvaultable without artificial assistance.

Listen to Hester Vaizey explore how the fall of the Berlin Wall affected East Germans:

How many people were killed trying to cross the Wall?

The Berlin Wall claimed the lives of at least 140 people. The first was 58-year old Ida Siekmann, who died on 22 August 1961 after jumping from a third-storey window in the famous Bernauer Straße, whose house-fronts constituted the border. Two days later, 24-year old Günter Litfin was machine-gunned in the waters of the inner-city docks now overlooked by Berlin’s main railway station.

The most public incident occurred on 17 August 1962 when two teenage East Berlin boys sprinted across no-man’s land near a border crossing-point nicknamed Checkpoint Charlie. One made it over, but 18-year old Peter Fechter was shot in the back and collapsed. Western photographers leaned over, calling on guards to rescue the unfortunate teen, but he was left to bleed out at the foot of the Wall, the guards apparently afraid of retaliatory fire from the west.
The body of 18-year-old Peter Fechter is carried away after he was shot trying to cross the Berlin Wall. (Image by Bettmann/Getty Images)

Yet not all escapes were such clear-cut tragedies. One would-be escaper had been a part-time Stasi informer who missed his good times in the west. Failing a consolation entrance exam into the secret police, Werner Probst then decided to leave once and for all. Slipping into the River Spree one night in October 1961, close to the iconic Oberbaum Bridge, he was picked out in the water by a searchlight and shot just short of the far bank.

Another nocturnal fire-fight three years later involved a tunnel that
had been dug from West Berlin into a back yard on the far side. (Visitors to the Berlin Wall Memorial today can trace its path marked in the former no-man's land.) Tunnellers had emerged inside an outside lavatory which offered convenient cover: 57 escapers 'went' but never returned. But their luck could not hold forever. Alerted by Stasi informants, armed border troops arrived, and in the ensuing confrontation one guard, Egon Schultz, was caught in the crossfire, hit in the shoulder by a West Berlin escape helper’s pistol and in the chest by a comrade’s Kalashnikov rifle. Only after the Cold War did it emerge that he had been killed by friendly fire. Indeed, over half of the 25 border guards killed at the border were shot by their own side.

- **The cost of unity: Ian Kershaw on the fall of the Berlin Wall**

The last people killed trying to cross the Berlin Wall were Chris Gueffroy, shot in February 1989, and Winfried Freudenberg, whose homemade hot-air balloon came to grief a month later. Yet far more persons escaped than were killed at the Berlin Wall. In the early sixties, escapers jumped from rooftops, abseiled from windows, burst through the Wall in improvised armoured trucks and steam locomotives, and hijacked ferries. But the numbers escaping dwindled from the thousands in the early 1960s to a handful each year by the 1980s. Yet, even in 1988 there were still around half a dozen escape attempts each month, more than half of which were successful, usually involving guards defecting, building workers exploiting repairs on the 'front line', or civilians using ingenious collapsible ladders to defeat the wall.

**What does the graffiti on the Berlin Wall mean?**

The Berlin Wall’s smooth surface became beloved of western graffiti artists who fought running battles with border guards’ whitewashings. New York hip hop-inspired artist Keith Haring became a coveted spray artist; Frenchman Thierry Noir specialised in colourful, primitivist Wall art.
Artist Keith Haring became a coveted spray artist. (Photo by Stiebing/ullstein bild via Getty Images)
For some former East German dissidents, however, such graffiti trivialised or aestheticised the Wall, leading one group of masked vigilantes to paint a white ‘delete’ line through the DayGlo, until they were seized by a border guard snatch squad through one of the secret doors built into the Wall. (Many forgot to their cost that the five metres on the western side of the Wall also belonged to East Berlin!) Other artists employed elaborate trompe l’oeil effects to camouflage the concrete behind, and countless thousands of tourists signed and dated their presence at the Wall or declared their undying love to their significant other in felt-tip pen.

- What brought a thaw in the Cold War?

**What was life like on either side of the Wall?**

Enclosed West Berlin became something of a mad, bad playground, attracting drop-outs and avant-gardists, who could enjoy a frisson of Cold War danger (but with little actual danger). "We can be heroes", sang David Bowie, in a song composed at the Hansa recording studio overlooking the Wall in Kreuzberg, where Bowie was neighbours with his partner-in-crime, Iggy Pop, but "just for one day". Uli Edel’s semi-documentary *Christiane F.* (1981) gives a good sense of the seedy urban chic of 1970s West Berlin around its drug scene at the Bahnhof Zoo, or Ian Walker’s *Zoo Station* (1987) documents one journalist’s frenetic travels back and
forth through the Cold War looking-glass.

- **1945: The race for Berlin**

The Wall maintained its lure to the alienated as some late Cold War westerners no longer thought that the west was necessarily the best. Punk band the Sex Pistols found their nihilistic match in it. In ‘Holidays in the Sun’, John Lydon engaged the eastern guards in an existential staring competition, threatening, in an act of paranoid Cold War paradox, to go “over the Berlin Wall, before they come over the Berlin Wall”.

On the eastern side of the Wall, East Berlin punks were complaining of “too much future”. The communist state still claimed to be exercising tough love for the common good. Living standards had risen by the mid-1960s, as the GDR was able to stabilise its workforce. East Berliners could be visited for the first time by West Berlin relatives at Christmas in 1963, but the eastern authorities were taking no chances and tailed incomers with mass surveillance teams. Yet, western visitors noticed a certain defensive pride among East Germans, who did not want to be patronised by ‘Besser-Wessis’ from the so-called ‘Golden West’.

Freedom of travel remained an issue, however. Holiday destinations within the eastern bloc began to shrink in the 1980s, when Poland became a no-go destination as the Solidarity movement blossomed there [a social movement that embodied the struggle against communism and Soviet domination, and ultimately helped lead to the fall of communism in Eastern Europe], followed by Russia under glasnost [Soviet policy of open discussion of political and social issues instituted by Mikhail Gorbachev which began the democratisation of the Soviet Union].
Many of the ambitious thirty-somethings, who back in the 1950s would have moved out and up in West Germany, felt blocked within the rigid hierarchies of "real existing socialism" behind walls. Certain goods such as cars and telephones always remained in short supply with waiting lists of up to 10 years – unimaginable in the instant-gratification west. Exotic fruits such as tangerines were reserved for Christmas only, and jokes circulated about why the banana was curved (because for 28 years it had to make a detour around the GDR...).

What events led to the Berlin Wall being torn down?

Things deteriorated in the 1980s. An energy crisis was about to engulf the eastern bloc, as Russia insisted on payment for its oil in hard currency. The advent of Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985 also posed a political reform challenge to the hard-line leadership under Erich Honecker. When Politburo member Kurt Hager pronounced that if a neighbour changed their wallpaper one did not need to follow suit, it became clear how out of touch the party leadership were becoming.

Iain MacGregor revisits some of the most dramatic events associated with the history of the Cold War barrier, the Berlin Wall:
What really accelerated the unravelling of the GDR, however, was the dismantling of the iron Curtain elsewhere, on the border between Hungary and Austria in the late spring of 1989. A loophole was created which led to a renewed exodus, that was then hastily blocked again. But the genie was out of the bottle. Hopeful East German emigrants began to camp out in West German embassies across the eastern bloc. Demonstrations by would-be leavers also started inside the country, focused on the city of Leipzig, where regular Monday prayer meetings at the Nikolaikirche church took on an increasingly dissident hue.

Even more dangerous to the GDR were the Hierbleiber, those determined to “stay here” and change the Workers’-and-Peasants’-State from within. Crunch-time occurred on 9 October 1989, when Leipzig’s security forces held back from a physical confrontation with the 70,000 demonstrators. East Germans had lost their fear. The GDR’s 40th birthday celebrations that month continued to be disrupted by mass counter-demonstrations wishing to see not the flourishing, but the end of state socialism.

On 9 November 1989, however, upheaval degenerated into farce. A rudderless East German regime was about to commit one of history’s greatest miscommunications. Battered by mass demonstrations, the party Central Committee had resigned en masse that day, but attempted one final act of damage limitation: citizens would be allowed to apply for passports for travel to the west for the first time in 28 years. But what had been designed as a delaying tactic, tying up citizens in red tape, turned into a stampede for the exit.
Thousands of people rush to the Berlin Wall after the opening of the Wall. (Photo by robert wallis/Corbis via Getty Images)

At a now famous press conference, the party's press spokesman, Günter Schabowski, who had not been fully briefed, read out the new dispensation, but when asked by foreign correspondents when this came into effect he looked uncertain, then shrugged: "immediately?" West German early evening news bulletins, all avidly consumed by East German viewers, announced that the Wall was open; by midnight tens of thousands of East Berliners had swamped the border checkpoints whose Stasi guards realised that the game was up. The Berlin Wall had fallen.

• What happened after the fall of the Berlin Wall?

What remains of the Berlin Wall today? What does it look like?

The Wall disappeared with unseemly haste. It was dismantled by the border troops who had built it, with the help of heavy-lifting equipment from Britain's Royal Engineers garrisoned in West Berlin. Initially, small sections were lifted out to create makeshift checkpoints. Some monoliths with particularly eye-catching Wall art were even auctioned at Monte Carlo in June 1990 in order to raise cash for a new East Berlin mayoralty seeking new revenue streams. Much was ground up for aggregate.
A boy chips at the Berlin wall in November 1989. (Photo by Pool CHUTE DU MUR BERLIN/Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images)

Today, visitors can see a long section of the eastern Wall at East Side Gallery, where international artists were invited in 1990 to decorate it with a series of frescoes. The most authentic section is to be found at Bernauer Straße, where the official monument to the Wall is located. Visitors can peep through the hinterland wall at the rear to see the so-called ‘death strip’ of raked sand and the paraphernalia of total control, including a guard tower and fluorescent lighting which could allegedly be seen from space as a halo around the western half of the city.

But there is also the hustle and bustle of Checkpoint Charlie where tourists can visit the slightly eccentric Haus am Checkpoint Charlie, filled with escape memorabilia, including even the white line jack-hammered out of the roadway at the famous intersection between two worlds, at which US tanks in 1961 had played chicken with their Soviet counterparts.
The military checkpoint hut at Checkpoint Charlie is not real, but a replica of the one from 1961. (Photo by Beata Zawrzel/NurPhoto via Getty Images)

Yet, as with much of the Cold War, all is not what it seems. The military checkpoint hut is not real, but a replica of the one from 1961. And for a Euro or two you can be photographed next to an actor in period uniform. The Cold War, in these uncertain times, seems to be making a come-back.

**What is the significance of the Berlin Wall today?**

The Berlin Wall was almost unique in that it was designed to keep people **in**. Conversely, the so-called ‘peace walls’ built in Belfast after 1969 were made to keep sectarian communities apart for fear of rioting; the Israeli separation barrier was built to keep out a terrorist threat; and Donald Trump’s Mexican wall (or is it a fence?) is supposed to keep out illegal economic migrants from south of the border. Walls that keep in their own populations, however, soon fall foul of the human rights enshrined in the United Nations, including, crucially, freedom of movement.

- **A brief history of border walls – from 2,000 BC to Trump’s Mexico wall**

  Already in the 1960s the East German regime had realised that it was now dealing with a captive audience, with no safety-valve of exit to the west, and so had to make some concessions for co-
existence with its citizenry. In 1973, when the GDR was admitted to the UN, it found itself trapped into a liberalisation which had already created many humanitarian 'holes' in the Wall before 1989.

In the longer perspective, the history of the Berlin Wall shows that walls do not work. In the age of electronic media, East Germans were still connected to an outside world – including by the BBC whose radio broadcasts and mountains of listeners' letters from East Germans are preserved at Reading-Caversham. The Wall itself simply became a lightning conductor of discontent. The physical separation of two Germanies for a generation certainly left its mark: speech patterns and even body language were different. East German teens' use of the intensifier 'urst' – meaning 'mega' – completely mystified westerners, as well as a party jargon which described flags as Winkelemente or 'wave elements'. Western brashness was seen by easterners as symptomatic of the Ellenbogengesellschaft or 'elbow-ahead society', which could not quite get the hang of queuing. It was former mayor of West Berlin, then chancellor of the Federal Republic, Willy Brandt, who maintained nonetheless that "what belongs together will grow together". This claim has perhaps proved the most optimistic since 1989.

West Germans celebrate atop the Berlin Wall. (Photo By Stephen Jaffe/Getty Images)

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It is noticeable that the alt-right Alternative für Deutschland has in
2019 been polling best in the eastern states of the former East Germany, areas which still feel left behind since unification in 1990 and fear what they see as Islamist inundation. But the European Union's steadfast defence of the principles of freedom of movement in the face of Brexit is certainly also a legacy of the Cold War. Angela Merkel herself grew up and worked behind the Berlin Wall and the view from her office window must remind her every day where it once stood, just yards away.

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