

The Berlin Wall: Cold War Symbol of a World

by Matthew Chicco and Oliver Schnabel

Berlin, a divided city in a divided country, and the Berlin Wall, which separated the eastern and western sectors of the city, were the most important symbols of the Cold War (1945-1991). They represented the great divide between the United States and the capitalist-democratic west and the Soviet Union and its allies amongst the Communist bloc of nations. Events in Berlin underscored the potential of Cold War divisions to erupt at any moment, or with the slightest provocation, into a world war that could unleash nuclear arsenals and annihilate the world.

As World War II drew to a close in Europe, ideological and economic conflicts amongst the allies that had been set aside because of the need to defeat a common enemy, began to surface. A major issue was the future map of Europe. The United States, with the support of Great Britain and free French forces, along with the Soviet Union, maneuvered to grab as much of the occupied German territories as possible. The Soviet Union, whether legitimately or not, feared that the capitalist powers of the West would seek to destabilize their country, and perhaps even invade, as they had done after World War I. The United States was concerned that once American troops had gone home across the Atlantic, the Soviet Union would be in a position to dominate the entire continent.

In 1945, leaders of the four powers met at Yalta and in Potsdam, where they divided the post-war world into spheres of influence and decided on a joint occupation of Germany. Germany was divided into four sectors, each controlled by a different member of the victorious alliance. Its capital city of Berlin, located deep



Tearing down the wall

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inside the Soviet sector, was also divided into areas administered by France, Great Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union. The division was formalized when the French, British and American sectors were combined into the Federal Republic of Germany and the Soviet sector became a separate country under the military control of the Soviet Union.

As the Cold War took shape, a divided Berlin symbolized the tensions of a divided world. In June, 1948, the Soviet Union blockaded West Berlin, cutting off supplies and western access to the city and supplies. The United States responded with an airlift and the stalemate lasted for about a year. In August, 1961, East Germany and the Soviet Union erected a wall of concrete and barbed wire to divide the city and prevent East Berliners from escaping to the west. In 1963, when United States President John Kennedy spoke at the Berlin Wall, he declared "All free men, wherever they may live, are citizens of Berlin, and, therefore, as a free man, I take pride in the words '*Ich bin ein Berliner*' (I am a Berliner)." In 1987, United States President Ronald Reagan visited Berlin and demanded that Soviet Premeir Mikhail Gorbachev "tear down this wall."



In November, 1989, with the Soviet Union beginning to collapse and with its control over its allies waning, the Berlin Wall was finally opened. Just as the Berlin blockade signaled the start of the Cold War and the Berlin Wall symbolized the division of the world into two hostile camps, the tearing down of the wall and the reunification of Berlin and Germany in 1990 marked the Cold War's end.

The primary source documents and activities in this package are designed to examine the importance of Berlin and the Berlin Wall during the Cold War.

President Reagan at Berlin Wall, 1987 (CNN)

1. Start of the Cold War. Winston Churchill was the British Prime Minister during most of World War II. In 1946, he gave a speech at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri where he coined the term "Iron Curtain." Joseph Stalin, Soviet Communist Party leader from 1929-1953, responded to Churchill in a speech later the same year.

Churchill: "An Iron Curtain has descended across the continent. Behind that line lie all of the capitals of the ancient states of central and eastern Europe . . . all these famous cities and the populations around lie in the Soviet sphere and all are subject . . . to a very high and increasing measure of control from Moscow."

Stalin: "The Soviet Union's loss of life [during World War II] has been several times greater than that of Britain and the United States of America put together. . . And so what can be so surprising about the fact that the Soviet Union, anxious for its future safety, is trying to see to it that governments loyal in their attitude to the Soviet Union should exist in these countries?"

Questions

1. According to Winston Churchill, what has happened to Eastern Europe?
2. How does Joseph Stalin justify what has happened?

2. Cold War Timeline. The history of the Berlin Wall and the history of the Cold War are directly related. Examine this joint timeline. What would you identify as the key events in the histories of the Berlin Wall and the Cold War? In your opinion, why might the Berlin Wall be considered the major symbol of the Cold War?

1947-1957

Year	Berlin and Germany	Cold War
1945	World War II in Europe is over. Germany and Berlin are divided into U.S., British, French and Soviet sectors.	At Yalta and Potsdam conferences, victorious allies divide the world into spheres of influence.
1947-1948	Berlin is divided into two different currency zones. Beginning of the Berlin Blockade by Soviet forces (June 24, 1948) and the U.S. airlift.	Communists take power in Poland. The U.S. announces the Truman Doctrine and Marshall Plan to contain the expansion of Soviet influence (1947).
1949	End of blockade and airlift. The Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) is founded in the U.S., British, and French sectors. The German Democratic Republic is founded (East Germany) in the Soviet sector.	The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is established by U.S. and its allies. The Soviet Union explodes its first atomic bomb. Communists win Chinese Civil War.
1950-1952	The border between East and West Germany is closed. Only the border between East and West Berlin remains open (1952).	UN forces led by the U.S. battle against communist forces from northern Korea and China. The Korean War ends in 1953 with the division of the Korean

		peninsula into two countries.
1953-1954	Protests by East Berlin building workers suppressed by Soviet Army. East German citizens need permission to travel to the West.	U.S. sponsored coups overthrow elected governments in Iran and Guatemala.
1955-1957	West Germany joins the NATO Alliance (1955). East Germans who try to go to the West are prosecuted and face prison terms up to three years.	Warsaw Pact formed by Soviet Union to counter NATO (1955). Summit Meeting between U.S. Pres. Eisenhower and Soviet Premier Khrushchev leads to a period of “peaceful coexistence.” Soviet Army crushes the Hungarian Revolution (1956). Soviet Union launches first man-made satellite (1957).

Year	Berlin and Germany	Cold War
1960-1962	East Germany builds Berlin Wall (1961). The border between East and West Berlin is closed. The Brandenburg Gate is closed. An 18-year-old East German named Peter Fechter is shot and dies while he tries to climb over the wall (1962).	A U.S. spy plane is shot down over the Soviet Union. U.S. supports a failed invasion of Cuba (1961). U.S. blockades Cuba and demands withdrawal of Soviet nuclear missiles (1962). World at the brink of war.
1963-1987	U.S. President Kennedy visits Berlin and declared “Ich bin ein Berliner” (I am a Berliner). After 2 years, West Berliner’s permitted to visit the East. Four Power’s Agreement over Berlin makes visits east easier for West Berliners (1971). U.S. President Reagan visits Berlin and urges Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev to tear down the Berlin Wall (1987).	U.S. and Soviet Union agree to <i>détente</i> (relaxation of tensions). U.S. military battles revolutionary movements in Vietnam (1965-1975), the Dominican Republic (1965), and Grenada (1983) and supports anti-government rebels in Chile (1973) and Nicaragua (1980s). Soviet forces crush an uprising in Czechoslovakia (1968) and support pro-Communist forces in Angola (1976) and Afghanistan (1979). Polish shipyard workers strike and start the anti-Soviet Solidarity movement (1980). Gorbachev becomes leader of the Soviet Union and promises <i>perestroika</i> (restructuring) and <i>glasnost</i> (openness).
1989	Berlin Wall is opened (November) and East Germany allows unrestricted migration to West Germany.	University students at Tiananmen Square demand reforms by the Chinese Communist government. Solidarity forms the first post-war non-Communist government in Poland.
1990-1991	The Berlin Wall is demolished. Germany is reunited (1990).	The Soviet Union collapses (1991) and is replaced by independent republics.

1960-1991

3. A Divided Germany and a Divided Berlin



On April 21, 1945, the Soviet Army entered Berlin. It soon controlled the entire city. At the end of the war, the three western members of the wartime alliance (United States, Britain and France) were given zones of occupation in the city in accordance with an agreement at the Yalta conference. They were also permitted access to Berlin through specific corridors from the western areas of Germany.

By 1947, the wartime alliance had completely broken down and the United States and Soviet Union were facing off as enemies. In March, President Truman pledged American support for “free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures.” Three months later, Secretary of State [Marshall](#) offered financial aid to promote economic recovery among pro-western European nations. As part of the U.S.-Soviet hostilities, the United States, France and Great Britain decided to merge the areas they occupied in western Germany into a new German Federal republic. In response to what they considered anti-Soviet provocations by the west, the Soviet military government in Berlin began a land blockade of the allied occupied areas of the city in April, 1948.

Questions: Which wartime ally controlled the sector of Germany where the city of Berlin was located? Why did this lead to conflict with the other wartime allies?

4. Air-Bridge to Berlin, *The New York Times*, June, 27, 1948, 1

“United States airpower throughout Europe is being mobilized for a great shuttle service into besieged Berlin. United States aircraft, which four years ago brought death to the city, will bring life in the form of food and medicines to the people of the Western sectors, whose food supplies have been cut off by the Russians. A greatly increased airlift will go into operation Monday. It will include, in addition to supplies for United States personnel in Berlin, a daily shipment of 200 tons of flour, medicines, serums, and vaccines and foodstuffs of small bulk but high caloric value.”

Berlin Airlift Statistics		Cargo (tons)				Passengers	
	Flights	Total	Food	Coal	Other	In	Out
USA	189,963	1,783,573	296,319	1,421,119	66,135	25,263	37,486
UK	87,841	541,937	240,386	164,911	136,640	34,815	130,091
France	424	896	unknown	unknown	unknown	10,000	

Questions

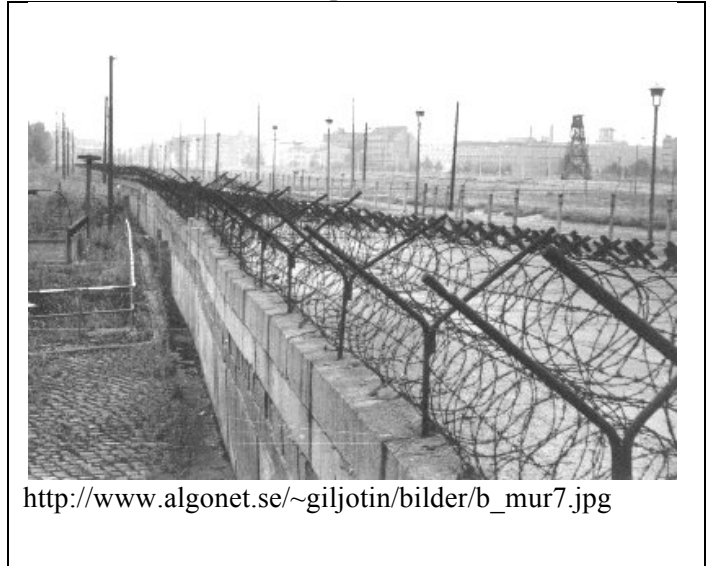
1. How did the United States respond to the Soviet blockade of land routes to Berlin?
2. According to the chart, what were the key supplies sent to West Berlin?
3. In your opinion, why would the United States consider it crucial to maintain its connection with Berlin?

5. The Berlin Wall. In the fifteen years following the Second World War, over 3 million people emigrated from the East Germany to West Germany. In 1961, in an attempt to keep people from leaving East Germany, the Soviet Union ordered the separation of East Berlin from West Berlin by means of a barbed wire fence. A concrete and barbed wire wall was completed in 1965.

East Germans attempt to Escape

The New York Times, November 6, 1961, 1

Thirty East Germans attempted to break through the barbed wire to reach West Berlin today. The fire of an East German Border guard disrupted the mass flight and only nine managed to reach the West. The successful group was composed of five men and four children. The relatives of the nine, including the mothers of the children, were not able to get across the border barrier. The flight took place at about 4 P.M. as darkness fell. The escape was said to have been planned originally by two families, but five other families joined the group at the last minute.



Question: According to this article, how did East Germans respond to the Berlin Wall?

6. Soviet Premier Khrushchev Justifies the Wall in his Memoir, *The New York Times*, November 12, 1989

“Comrade Ulbricht [East German head of state] himself told me that the economy of the GDR immediately began to improve after the establishment of border control. [It] had a very positive effect on the consciousness of the people. It strengthened them and reminded them that the task of building Socialism was a challenge of solid and lasting importance, dwarfing the temporary phenomenon of West German propaganda which had been used to tempt the East Germans over to the side of capitalism. The establishment of border control restored order and discipline in the East Germans’ lives (and the Germans have always appreciated discipline).”

Question: How did the Soviet Union and East Germany defend the construction of the Berlin Wall?

7. United States Presidents Discuss a Divided Berlin. Compare the speeches by President Kennedy and President Reagan. Identify similarities and differences in their themes, phrases and objectives.

Excerpts from President Kennedy’s speech in the Rudolph Wilde Platz, West Berlin, on June 26, 1963.	Excerpts from President Reagan’s speech at the Brandenburg Gate, West Berlin, on June 12, 1987.
Today, in the world of freedom, the proudest boast is “<i>Ich bin ein Berliner</i>.” There are many people in the world who really don’t understand, or say they don’t, what is the great issue between the free world and the Communist world. Let them come to Berlin. There are some who say that communism is the wave of the future. Let them come to Berlin. And there are some who say in Europe and elsewhere we can work with the	We come to Berlin, we American presidents, because it’s our duty to speak, in this place, of freedom. . . . Behind me stands a wall that encircles the free sectors of this city, part of a vast system of barriers that divides the entire continent of Europe. . . . Here in Berlin where the wall emerges most clearly; here, cutting across your city, where the news photo and the television screen have imprinted this brutal division of a continent upon the mind of the world. Standing before the Brandenburg Gate, every man is a German, separated from his fellow men. Every man is a Berliner, forced to look upon a scar. . . . I find in Berlin a message of hope, even in the shadow of this wall, a message of triumph. . . . There is one sign the Soviets can make that would be unmistakable, that would advance dramatic-ally the cause of freedom

Communists. . . . <i>Lass' sie nach Berlin kommen</i>. Let them come to Berlin. . . . Freedom is indivisible, and when one man is enslaved, all are not free. When all are free, then we can look forward to that day when this city will be joined as one and this country and this great Continent of Europe in a peaceful and hopeful globe. When that day finally comes, as it will, the people of West Berlin can take sober satisfaction in the fact that they were in the front lines for almost two decades. All free men, wherever they may live, are citizens of Berlin, and, therefore, as a free man, I take pride in the words "<i>Ich bin ein Berliner</i>."	and peace. General Secretary Gorbachev, if you seek peace, if you seek prosperity for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, if you seek liberalization: Come here to this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!
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8. Tearing Down the Berlin Wall

A. "East German's Great Awakening," *The New York Times*, November 10, 1989, 36.

"Physically the Berlin wall still stands. But its capacity to divide a country and a Continent seems at an end. East Germany's hastily reshaped politburo now promises its people what even two weeks ago was still unthinkable: unrestricted travel to the West; free elections; market-oriented economic reforms. Deathbed conversions are always suspect. But what Marxists call objective realities suggest this great awakening will endure."

B. "Cheers as Brandenburg Gate Reopens," *The New York Times*, December 23, 1989, 7.

"Leaders of the two Germanys reopened the Brandenburg Gate today, breaching a barrier that more than any other had come to symbolize the division of the nation. Tens of thousands of Germans, oblivious to a steady drizzle, packed both sides of Berlin's most famous gate to celebrate the formal inauguration of two new pedestrian crossings. . . . Although it has been six weeks since the Berlin wall fell open and at least half the East Germans have visited the West, the reopening of the two-century-old landmark offered symbolic confirmation that the German nation was again seeking to become whole."

C. "Final Month of Berlin Wall," *The New York Times*, June 16, 1990, 4. "East Germany has set a deadline of December for total demolition of the Berlin wall, which sealed citizens off from the West for 28 years. The state press agency quoted Maj. Gen. Dieter Teichmann, chief of the border troops, as saying that the concrete barrier would be gone by December. On Wednesday, East Germans began knocking out wall slabs all over the city to reopen blocked streets."

Question: How do these articles document the historical significance of the Berlin Wall and its demise?