The Berlin Wall

On August 13th, 1961, the Communist government of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) (or East Germany) began to build a wall between East and West Berlin. It was called the "Antifascistischer Schutzwall" (anti-fascist barrier). The official purpose of the wall was to keep western "fascists" from entering East Germany and undermining the socialist state, but it primarily served the objective of stopping defections from East to West Berlin. The Berlin Wall existed until November 9th, 1989, when the head of the East German Communist Party announced that citizens of the GDR could cross the border. That night, crowds stormed on the wall. Many crossed freely into West Berlin, while others used hammers and picks to destroy the wall. The Berlin Wall was one of the most powerful and enduring symbols of the Cold War.

1) The Partitioning of Berlin

When World War II finished in 1945, a peace conference at Potsdam determined the fate of Germany's territories. They split the defeated nation into "allied occupation zones": The eastern part of the country belonged to the Soviet Union, while the western part belonged to the United States, Great Britain and France.

Even though Berlin was located entirely within the Soviet part of the country (about 100 miles from the border between the eastern and western zones), the Potsdam agreement divided the city into similar sectors. The Soviets took the eastern half, while the Allies took the western half. This two-way occupation of Berlin began in June 1945.

2) Escaping from East Berlin

The existence of West Berlin, a capitalist city surrounded by communist East Germany, was a "thorn in the side" for the Soviets. The Russians tried to drive the Allies out of the city. In 1948, they tried to starve the Allies out of the city, by preventing food deliveries. Instead of retreating, however, the USA, the UK and France supplied their sectors of the city by airplane drops. 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.

After a decade of calm, tensions rose again in 1958. For the next three years, the Soviets made many threats and the Allies resisted them all. During this time, the Soviets were embarrassed by the endless flow of refugees from east to west. Nearly 3 million people left East Berlin - many of them were young, skilled workers such as doctors, teachers and engineers.

Summits, conferences and other negotiations occurred, but all without resolution. Meanwhile, the flow of refugees continued. Between June and August of 1961, 65,000 people crossed the border into West Berlin.

3) Building the Wall

In August, Premier Khrushchev gave the government permission to stop the flow of emigrants by closing its border for good. In just two weeks, the army, police and volunteer workers completed a temporary blockade, using barbed wire and concrete, dividing the city in two parts.

Before the wall was built, Berliners on both sides of the city could move around freely. They crossed the border to work, to shop, to go to the theater and the cinema. Trains and subways carried passengers to and fro. However, after the wall was built, it became impossible to pass

from East to West Berlin, except at three checkpoints: at Helmstedt ("Checkpoint Alpha"), at Dreilinden ("Checkpoint Bravo") and in the center of Berlin at Friedrichstrasse ("Checkpoint Charlie"). Eventually, the GDR built 12 checkpoints along the wall. At the checkpoints, soldiers only allowed diplomats and other officials to cross the border. Ordinary citizens were not allowed to cross. The wall was 140km in length and completely circled West Berlin.

4) The Berlin Wall: 1961-1989

The construction of the Berlin Wall effectively stopped the flow of refugees from East to West, and it also defused the crisis over Berlin. President John F. Kennedy said that "a wall is a lot better than a war." Almost two years after the Berlin Wall was erected, John F. Kennedy delivered one of the most famous speeches of his presidency to a crowd of more than 120,000 people outside West Berlin's city hall, close to the Brandenburg Gate. His speech included the phrase. "Ich bin ein Berliner" ("I am a Berliner").

In total, about 170 people were killed trying to cross the border - under or over the Berlin Wall. However, escape from East Germany was not impossible: between 1961 and 1989, more than 5,000 East Germans (including about 600 border guards) crossed the border by jumping from windows close to the wall, climbing over the barbed wire, flying in hot air balloons, crawling through sewers and driving through the wall at high speed.

5) The Fall of the Wall

On Thursday, November 9th, 1989, as the Cold War was declining, the Communist Party leader announced a change in relations with the West. He said that, from midnight, citizens of the GDR would be free to cross the border. During the day, East and West Berliners rushed to the wall, shouting "Tor auf!" ("Open the gate!"). At midnight, thousands of people passed freely through the checkpoints.

During the next two days, more than 2 million people from East Berlin visited West Berlin to participate in one of the greatest street parties in the history of the world. People continued to use hammers and picks to tear down the wall, while cranes and bulldozers pulled down parts of the wall. A few days later, the wall was completely destroyed and Berlin was united for the first time since 1945.

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

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