Berlin Wall

The **Berlin Wall** ([German](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_language): *Berliner Mauer*, pronounced [[bɛʁˌliːnɐ ˈmaʊ̯ɐ]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Help%3AIPA/Standard_German) ([listen](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/ea/De-Berliner_Mauer.ogg))) was a guarded concrete [barrier](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Separation_barrier) that physically and ideologically divided [Berlin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin) from 1961 to 1989 as well as encircling and separating West Berlin from East German territory.[[1]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-Chicago_Tribune_1-1) Construction of the wall was commenced by the German Democratic Republic (GDR, [East Germany](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/East_Germany)) on 13 August 1961. The Wall cut off [West Berlin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/West_Berlin) from surrounding [East Germany](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/East_Germany), including [East Berlin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/East_Berlin).[[2]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-2) The barrier included guard towers placed along large concrete walls,[[3]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall%22%20%5Cl%20%22cite_note-Marck-3) accompanied by a wide area (later known as the "death strip") that contained anti-vehicle trenches, [beds of nails](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bed_of_nails) and other defenses. The [Eastern Bloc](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eastern_Bloc) portrayed the Wall as protecting its population from [fascist](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fascism) elements conspiring to prevent the "will of the people" from building a [socialist state](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communism) in East Germany.

GDR authorities officially referred to the Berlin Wall as the **Anti-Fascist Protection Rampart** ([German](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_language): *Antifaschistischer Schutzwall*). The West Berlin city government sometimes referred to it as the "[Wall of Shame](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wall_of_Shame)", a term coined by mayor [Willy Brandt](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Willy_Brandt) in reference to the Wall's restriction on [freedom of movement](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freedom_of_movement).[[4]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-4) Along with the separate and much longer [Inner German border](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inner_German_border) (IGB), which demarcated the border between East and [West Germany](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/West_Germany), it came to symbolize physically the "[Iron Curtain](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iron_Curtain)" that separated Western Europe and the [Eastern Bloc](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eastern_Bloc) during the [Cold War](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cold_War).[[5]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-cnn.com-5)

Before the Wall's erection, 3.5 million East Germans circumvented [Eastern Bloc emigration restrictions](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eastern_Bloc_emigration_and_defection) and defected from the GDR, many by crossing over the border from East Berlin into West Berlin; from there they could then travel to West Germany and to other Western European countries. Between 1961 and 1989, the Wall prevented almost all such emigration.[[6]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-6) During this period, over 100,000[[7]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-7) people attempted to escape, and over 5,000 people succeeded in escaping over the Wall, with an estimated death toll ranging from 136[[8]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-Chronik-8) to more than 200[[5]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-cnn.com-5)[[9]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-contemporary_research-9) in and around Berlin.

In 1989, a [series of revolutions](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Revolutions_of_1989) in nearby Eastern Bloc countries—in [Poland](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polish_People%27s_Republic) and [Hungary](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hungarian_People%27s_Republic) in particular—caused a chain reaction in East Germany.[[10]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-ReferenceA-10) In particular, the [Pan-European Picnic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pan-European_Picnic) in August 1989 set in motion a peaceful development during which the Iron Curtain largely broke, the rulers in the East came under pressure, the Berlin Wall fell and finally the Eastern Bloc fell apart.[[11]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-11)[[12]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-Thomas_Roser_2018-12)[[13]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-Gorbatschows_2009-13) After several weeks of civil unrest, the East German government [announced](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fall_of_the_Berlin_Wall) on 9 November 1989 that all GDR citizens could visit West Germany and West Berlin. Crowds of East Germans crossed and climbed onto the Wall, joined by West Germans on the other side in a celebratory atmosphere. Over the next few weeks, the likes of souvenir hunters chipped away parts of the Wall.[[5]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-cnn.com-5) The [Brandenburg Gate](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brandenburg_Gate), a few meters from the Berlin Wall, was opened on 22 December 1989. The demolition of the Wall officially began on 13 June 1990 and was completed in 1994.[[1]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-Chicago_Tribune_1-1) The "fall of the Berlin Wall" paved the way for [German reunification](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_reunification), which formally took place on 3 October 1990.[[5]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-cnn.com-5)

## **Background**

### Post-war Germany

After the [end of World War II in Europe](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/End_of_World_War_II_in_Europe), what remained of pre-war Germany west of the [Oder-Neisse line](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oder-Neisse_line) was divided into four occupation zones (as per the [Potsdam Agreement](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Potsdam_Agreement)), each one controlled by one of the four occupying [Allied powers](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allies_of_World_War_II): the [United States](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States), the [United Kingdom](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Kingdom_of_Great_Britain_and_Northern_Ireland), [France](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/France) and the [Soviet Union](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soviet_Union). The capital of Berlin, as the seat of the [Allied Control Council](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allied_Control_Council), was similarly subdivided into four sectors despite the city's location, which was fully within the Soviet zone.[[14]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-miller4-14)

Within two years, political divisions increased between the Soviets and the other occupying powers. These included the Soviets' refusal to agree to reconstruction plans making post-war Germany self-sufficient, and to a detailed accounting of industrial plants, goods and infrastructure—some of which had already been removed by the Soviets.[[15]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-miller16-15) France, the United Kingdom, the United States, and the [Benelux](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benelux) countries later met to combine the non-Soviet zones of Germany into one zone for reconstruction, and to approve the extension of the [Marshall Plan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marshall_Plan).[[5]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-cnn.com-5)

### Eastern Bloc and the Berlin airlift

*Further information:*[*Eastern Bloc*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eastern_Bloc)*and*[*Berlin Blockade*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Blockade)



Brandenburg Gate in 1945, after the end of World War II

Following the defeat of Nazi Germany in World War II, the Soviet Union engineered the installation of friendly Communist governments in most of the countries occupied by Soviet military forces at the end of the War, including Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, and the GDR, which together with Albania formed the [Comecon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comecon%22%20%5Co%20%22Comecon) in 1949 and later a military alliance, the [Warsaw Pact](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Warsaw_Pact). This bloc of nations was set up by the Soviets in opposition to NATO in the capitalist West in what became the [Cold War](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cold_War).

Since the end of the War, the Soviets together with like-minded East Germans created a new Soviet-style regime in the Soviet Zone and later the GDR, on a centrally planned socialist economic model with nationalized means of production, and with repressive police state institutions, under party dictatorship of the SED similar to the party dictatorship of the Soviet Communist Party in the USSR.[[16]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-16)

At the same time, a parallel regime was established under the strict control of the Western powers in the zones of post-war Germany occupied by them, culminating in the foundation of the Federal Republic of Germany in 1949,[[17]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall%22%20%5Cl%20%22cite_note-17) which initially claimed to be the sole legitimate power in all of Germany, East and West. The material [standard of living](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Standard_of_living) in the Western zones of Berlin began to improve quickly, and residents of the Soviet Zone soon began leaving for the West in large numbers, fleeing hunger, poverty and repression in the Soviet Zone for a better life in the West. Soon residents of other parts of the Soviet Zone began to escape to the West through Berlin, and this migration, called in Germany "Republikflucht", deprived the Soviet Zone not only of working forces desperately needed for post-war reconstruction but disproportionately highly educated people, which came to be known as the "Brain Drain".[[*citation needed*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia%3ACitation_needed)]

In 1948, in response to moves by the Western powers to establish a separate, federal system of government in the Western zones, and to extend the Marshall Plan to Germany, the Soviets instituted the [Berlin Blockade](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Blockade), preventing people, food, materials and supplies from arriving in [West Berlin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/West_Berlin) by land routes through the Soviet zone.[[18]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-18) The United States, the United Kingdom, [France](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/France), [Canada](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canada), [Australia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Australia), [New Zealand](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Zealand) and several other countries began a massive "[airlift](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_airlift)", supplying West Berlin with food and other supplies.[[19]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-19) The Soviets mounted a public relations campaign against the Western policy change. Communists attempted to disrupt the elections of 1948, preceding large losses therein,[[20]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall%22%20%5Cl%20%22cite_note-turner29-20) while 300,000 Berliners demonstrated for the international airlift to continue.[[21]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-21) In May 1949, Stalin lifted the blockade, permitting the resumption of Western shipments to Berlin.[[22]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-Gaddis_2005,_p._34-22)[[23]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-23)

The German Democratic Republic (the "GDR"; East Germany) was declared on 7 October 1949. On that day, the USSR ended the Soviet military government which had governed the Soviet Occupation Zone (Sowetische Besatzungszone) since the end of the War and handed over legal power[[24]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-24)[[*page needed*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia%3ACiting_sources)] to the Provisorische Volkskammer under the new Constitution of the GDR which came into force that day. However, until 1955, the Soviets maintained considerable legal control over the GDR state, including the regional governments, through the Sowetische Kontrollkommission and maintained a presence in various East German administrative, military, and secret police structures.[[25]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-wettig179-25)[[26]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-26) Even after legal sovereignty of the GDR was restored in 1955, the Soviet Union continued to maintain considerable influence over administration and lawmaking in the GDR through the Soviet embassy and through the implicit threat of force which could be exercised through the continuing large Soviet military presence in the GDR, which was used to bloodily repress protests in East Germany in June 1953.[[27]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-27)

East Germany differed from West Germany ([Federal Republic of Germany](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/West_Germany)), which developed into a [Western](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western_civilization) capitalist country with a [social market economy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_market_economy) and a [democratic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democracy) parliamentary government. Continual economic growth starting in the 1950s fueled a 20-year "[economic miracle](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wirtschaftswunder)" (*"Wirtschaftswunder"*). As West Germany's economy grew, and its standard of living steadily improved, many East Germans wanted to move to West Germany.[[28]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-28)

### Emigration westward in the early 1950s

*Main articles:*[*Eastern Bloc emigration and defection*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eastern_Bloc_emigration_and_defection)*and*[*Eastern Bloc*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eastern_Bloc)

After the Soviet occupation of Eastern Europe at the end of World War II, the majority of those living in the newly acquired areas of the [Eastern Bloc](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eastern_Bloc) aspired to independence and wanted the Soviets to leave.[[29]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-thackeray188-29) Taking advantage of the zonal border between occupied zones in Germany, the number of GDR citizens moving to West Germany totaled 187,000 in 1950; 165,000 in 1951; 182,000 in 1952; and 331,000 in 1953.[[30]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-30)[[31]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-loescher60-31) One reason for the sharp 1953 increase was fear of potential further [Sovietization](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sovietization), given the increasingly paranoid actions of [Joseph Stalin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Stalin) in late 1952 and early 1953.[[32]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-loescher68-32) 226,000 had fled in just the first six months of 1953.[[33]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-dale17-33)

## **Erection of the inner German border**

*Further information:*[*Inner German border*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inner_German_border)*and*[*Eastern Bloc emigration and defection*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eastern_Bloc_emigration_and_defection)

By the early 1950s, the Soviet approach to controlling national movement, restricting emigration, was emulated by most of the rest of the [Eastern Bloc](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eastern_Bloc), including East Germany.[[34]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-dowty114-34) The restrictions presented a quandary for some Eastern Bloc states, which had been more economically advanced and open than the Soviet Union, such that crossing borders seemed more natural—especially where no prior border existed between East and West Germany.[[35]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-dowty116-35)

Up until 1952, the demarcation lines between East Germany and the western occupied zones could be easily crossed in most places.[[36]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-dowty121-36) On 1 April 1952, East German leaders met the Soviet leader [Joseph Stalin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Stalin) in Moscow; during the discussions, Stalin's foreign minister [Vyacheslav Molotov](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vyacheslav_Molotov%22%20%5Co%20%22Vyacheslav%20Molotov) proposed that the East Germans should "introduce a system of passes for visits of West Berlin residents to the territory of East Berlin [so as to stop] free movement of Western agents" in the GDR. Stalin agreed, calling the situation "intolerable". He advised the East Germans to build up their border defenses, telling them that "The demarcation line between East and West Germany should be considered a border—and not just any border, but a dangerous one ... The Germans will guard the line of defence with their lives."[[37]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-harrison240-37)

Consequently, the [inner German border](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inner_German_border) between the two German states was closed, and a barbed-wire fence erected. The border between the Western and Eastern sectors of Berlin, however, remained open, although traffic between the Soviet and the Western sectors was somewhat restricted. This resulted in Berlin becoming a magnet for East Germans desperate to escape life in the GDR, and also a flashpoint for tension between the United States and the Soviet Union.[[5]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-cnn.com-5)

In 1955, the Soviets gave East Germany authority over civilian movement in Berlin, passing control to a regime not recognized in the West.[[38]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-harrison98-38) Initially, East Germany granted "visits" to allow its residents access to West Germany. However, following the defection of large numbers of East Germans (known as *[Republikflucht](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Republikflucht%22%20%5Co%20%22Republikflucht)*) under this regime, the new East German state legally restricted virtually all travel to the West in 1956.[[36]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-dowty121-36) Soviet East German ambassador [Mikhail Pervukhin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mikhail_Pervukhin) observed that "the presence in Berlin of an open and essentially uncontrolled border between the socialist and capitalist worlds unwittingly prompts the population to make a comparison between both parts of the city, which unfortunately does not always turn out in favour of Democratic [East] Berlin."[[39]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-harrison99-39)

### Berlin emigration loophole

With the closing of the inner German border officially in 1952,[[39]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall%22%20%5Cl%20%22cite_note-harrison99-39) the border in Berlin remained considerably more accessible because it was administered by all four occupying powers.[[36]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-dowty121-36) Accordingly, Berlin became the main route by which East Germans left for the West.[[40]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-40) On 11 December 1957, East Germany introduced a new passport law that reduced the overall number of refugees leaving Eastern Germany.[[5]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-cnn.com-5)

It had the unintended result of drastically increasing the percentage of those leaving through West Berlin from 60% to well over 90% by the end of 1958.[[39]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-harrison99-39) Those caught trying to leave East Berlin were subjected to heavy penalties, but with no physical barrier and [subway](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_U-Bahn) train access still available to West Berlin, such measures were ineffective.[[41]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-dowty122-41) The Berlin sector border was essentially a "[loophole](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Loophole)" through which Eastern Bloc citizens could still escape.[[39]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-harrison99-39) The 3.5 million East Germans who had left by 1961 totalled approximately 20% of the entire East German population.[[41]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-dowty122-41)

An important reason that passage between East Germany and West Berlin was not stopped earlier was that doing so would cut off much of the railway traffic in East Germany. Construction of a new railway bypassing West Berlin, the [Berlin outer ring](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_outer_ring), commenced in 1951. Following the completion of the railway in 1961, closing the border became a more practical proposition.[*[citation needed](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia%3ACitation_needed%22%20%5Co%20%22Wikipedia%3ACitation%20needed)*]

### Brain drain

The emigrants tended to be young and well-educated, leading to the ["brain drain"](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_capital_flight) feared by officials in East Germany.[[29]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-thackeray188-29) [Yuri Andropov](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yuri_Andropov), then the [CPSU](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communist_Party_of_the_Soviet_Union%22%20%5Co%20%22Communist%20Party%20of%20the%20Soviet%20Union) Director on Relations with Communist and Workers' Parties of Socialist Countries, wrote an urgent letter on 28 August 1958 to the Central Committee about the significant 50% increase in the number of East German intelligentsia among the refugees.[[42]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-harrison100-42) Andropov reported that, while the East German leadership stated that they were leaving for economic reasons, testimony from refugees indicated that the reasons were more political than material.[[42]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-harrison100-42) He stated "the flight of the intelligentsia has reached a particularly critical phase."[[42]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-harrison100-42)

By 1960, the combination of World War II and the massive emigration westward left East Germany with only 61% of its population of working age, compared to 70.5% before the war. The loss was disproportionately heavy among professionals: engineers, technicians, physicians, teachers, lawyers, and skilled workers. The direct cost of manpower losses to East Germany (and corresponding gain to the West) has been estimated at $7 billion to $9 billion, with East German party leader [Walter Ulbricht](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walter_Ulbricht) later claiming that West Germany owed him $17 billion in compensation, including reparations as well as manpower losses.[[41]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-dowty122-41) In addition, the drain of East Germany's young population potentially cost it over 22.5 billion marks in lost educational investment.[[43]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-43) The brain drain of professionals had become so damaging to the political credibility and economic viability of East Germany that the re-securing of the German communist frontier was imperative.[[44]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-pearson75-44)

The exodus of emigrants from East Germany presented two minor potential benefits: an easy opportunity to smuggle East German secret agents to West Germany, and a reduction in the number of citizens hostile to the communist regime. Neither of these advantages, however, proved particularly useful.[[45]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-45)

## **Start of the construction (1961)**



Aerial footage of the wall as filmed by the [CIA](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/CIA) in 1961

East German [Combat Groups of the Working Class](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Combat_Groups_of_the_Working_Class) close the border on 13 August 1961 in preparation for the Berlin Wall construction.



East German construction workers building the Berlin Wall, 20 November 1961.



Animation showing how the Berlin Wall was constructed

*Main article:*[*Berlin Crisis of 1961*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Crisis_of_1961)

On 15 June 1961, First Secretary of the [Socialist Unity Party](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socialist_Unity_Party_of_Germany) and [GDR State Council](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/State_Council_of_East_Germany) chairman [Walter Ulbricht](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walter_Ulbricht) stated in an international press conference, *"Niemand hat die Absicht, eine Mauer zu errichten!"* (No one has the intention of erecting a wall!). It was the first time the colloquial term *Mauer* (wall) had been used in this context.[[46]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-46)

The transcript of a telephone call between [Nikita Khrushchev](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nikita_Khrushchev) and Ulbricht, on 1 August in the same year, suggests that the initiative for the construction of the Wall came from Khrushchev.[[47]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-47)[[48]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-48) However, other sources suggest that Khrushchev had initially been wary about building a wall, fearing negative Western reaction. Nevertheless, Ulbricht had pushed for a border closure for quite some time, arguing that East Germany's very existence was at stake.[[49]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-Revolution1989-49)[[*page needed*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia%3ACiting_sources)]

Khrushchev had become emboldened upon seeing US president [John F. Kennedy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_F._Kennedy)'s youth and inexperience, which he considered a weakness. In the 1961 [Vienna summit](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vienna_summit), Kennedy made the error of admitting that the US wouldn't actively oppose the building of a barrier.[[50]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-50) A feeling of miscalculation and failure immediately afterwards was admitted by Kennedy in a candid interview with *New York Times* columnist [James "Scotty" Reston](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Reston).[[51]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-51) On Saturday, 12 August 1961, the leaders of the GDR attended a [garden party](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Party#Garden_party) at a government guesthouse in *Döllnsee*, in a wooded area to the north of East Berlin. There, Ulbricht signed the order to close the border and erect a wall.[[5]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-cnn.com-5)

At midnight, the police and units of the East German army began to close the border and, by Sunday morning, 13 August, the border with West Berlin was closed. East German troops and workers had begun to tear up streets running alongside the border to make them impassable to most vehicles and to install barbed wire entanglements and fences along the 156 kilometres (97 mi) around the three western sectors, and the 43 kilometres (27 mi) that divided West and East Berlin.[[52]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-52) The date of 13 August became commonly referred to as [Barbed Wire Sunday](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barbed_Wire_Sunday) in Germany.[[5]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-cnn.com-5)

The barrier was built inside East Berlin or East German territory to ensure that it did not encroach on West Berlin at any point. Generally, the Wall was only slightly inside East Berlin, but in a few places it was some distance from the legal border, most notably at [Potsdamer Bahnhof](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Potsdamer_Bahnhof%22%20%5Co%20%22Berlin%20Potsdamer%20Bahnhof)[[53]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-53) and the Lenné Triangle[[54]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-54) that is now much of the [Potsdamer Platz](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Potsdamer_Platz%22%20%5Co%20%22Potsdamer%20Platz) development.

Later, the initial barrier was built up into the Wall proper, the first concrete elements and large blocks being put in place on 17 August. During the construction of the Wall, [National People's Army](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_People%27s_Army) (NVA) and [Combat Groups of the Working Class](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Combat_Groups_of_the_Working_Class) (KdA) soldiers stood in front of it with orders to shoot anyone who attempted to defect. Additionally, chain fences, walls, minefields and other obstacles were installed along the length of East Germany's western border with West Germany proper. A huge no man's land was cleared to provide a clear line of fire at fleeing refugees.[[55]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-autogenerated1961-55)

### Immediate effects

With the closing of the east–west sector boundary in Berlin, the vast majority of East Germans could no longer travel or emigrate to West Germany. Berlin soon went from being the easiest place to make an unauthorized crossing between East and West Germany to being the most difficult.[[56]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-56) Many families were split, while East Berliners employed in the West were cut off from their jobs. West Berlin became an isolated [exclave](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exclave) in a hostile land. West Berliners demonstrated against the Wall, led by their Mayor (*Oberbürgermeister*) [Willy Brandt](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Willy_Brandt), who criticized the United States for failing to respond and went so far as to suggest to Washington what to do next. Kennedy was furious.[[57]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-57) Allied intelligence agencies had hypothesized about a wall to stop the flood of refugees, but the main candidate for its location was around the perimeter of the city. In 1961, Secretary of State Dean Rusk proclaimed, "The Wall certainly ought not to be a permanent feature of the European landscape. I see no reason why the Soviet Union should think it is—it is to their advantage in any way to leave there that monument to communist failure."[[55]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-autogenerated1961-55)

United States and UK sources had expected the Soviet sector to be sealed off from West Berlin but were surprised by how long the East Germans took for such a move. They considered the Wall as an end to concerns about a GDR/Soviet retaking or capture of the whole of Berlin; the Wall would presumably have been an unnecessary project if such plans were afloat. Thus, they concluded that the possibility of a Soviet military conflict over Berlin had decreased.[[58]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-58)

The East German government claimed that the Wall was an "anti-fascist protective rampart" ([German](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_language): *"antifaschistischer Schutzwall"*) intended to dissuade aggression from the West.[[59]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-59) Another official justification was the activities of Western agents in Eastern Europe.[[60]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-60) The Eastern German government also claimed that West Berliners were buying out state-subsidized goods in East Berlin. East Germans and others greeted such statements with skepticism, as most of the time, the border was only closed for citizens of East Germany traveling to the West, but not for residents of West Berlin travelling to the East.[[61]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-61) The construction of the Wall had caused considerable hardship to families divided by it. Most people believed that the Wall was mainly a means of preventing the citizens of East Germany from entering or fleeing to West Berlin.[[62]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-62)

### Secondary response



[Universal Newsreel](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universal_Newsreel) of the 1st anniversary of the Berlin Wall



[US President](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/President_of_the_United_States) [John F. Kennedy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_F._Kennedy) visiting the Berlin Wall on 26 June 1963

The [National Security Agency](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Security_Agency) was the only American intelligence agency that was aware that East Germany was to take action to deal with the brain drain problem. On 9 August 1961, the NSA intercepted an advance warning information of the [Socialist Unity Party's](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socialist_Unity_Party_of_Germany) plan to close the intra-Berlin border between East and West Berlin completely for foot traffic. The interagency intelligence Berlin Watch Committee assessed that this intercept "might be the first step in a plan to close the border."[[63]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-TNSA20130925-63)[[64]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-AidBurr20130925-64) This warning did not reach John F. Kennedy until noon on 13 August 1961, while he was vacationing in his yacht off the [Kennedy Compound](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kennedy_Compound) in [Hyannis Port, Massachusetts](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hyannis_Port%2C_Massachusetts). While Kennedy was angry that he had no advance warning, he was relieved that the East Germans and the Soviets had only divided Berlin without taking any action against West Berlin's access to the West. However, he denounced the Berlin Wall, whose erection worsened the relations between the United States and the Soviet Union.[[63]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-TNSA20130925-63)[[64]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-AidBurr20130925-64)

In response to the erection of the Berlin Wall, a retired general, [Lucius D. Clay](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lucius_D._Clay), was appointed by Kennedy as his special advisor with ambassadorial rank. Clay had been the Military Governor of the US Zone of Occupation in Germany during the period of the Berlin Blockade and had ordered the first measures in what became the [Berlin Airlift](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Airlift). He was immensely popular with the residents of West Berlin, and his appointment was an unambiguous sign that Kennedy would not compromise on the status of West Berlin. As a symbolic gesture, Kennedy sent Clay and Vice President [Lyndon B. Johnson](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lyndon_B._Johnson) to West Berlin. They landed at [Tempelhof Airport](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tempelhof_International_Airport%22%20%5Co%20%22Tempelhof%20International%20Airport) on the afternoon of Saturday, 19 August 1961 and were greeted enthusiastically by the local population.

**FACTS:NOV 9, 2019**

**1. The fall of the Berlin Wall happened by mistake.**
At a press conference on the evening of November 9, 1989, East German politburo member Günter Schabowski prematurely announced that restrictions on travel visas would be lifted. When asked when the new policy would begin, he said, “Immediately, without delay.” In actuality, the policy was to be announced the following day and would still have required [East Germans](https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/east-germany-created) to go through a lengthy visa application process. Schabowski’s confused answers and erroneous media reports that border crossings had opened spurred thousands of East Berliners to the [Berlin Wall](https://www.history.com/topics/cold-war/berlin-wall).

At the Bornholmer Street checkpoint, Harald Jäger, the chief officer on duty, faced a mob growing in size and frustration. Receiving insults, rather than instructions, from his superiors and nervously expecting results of his cancer diagnostic tests the next day, the overwhelmed Jäger opened the border crossing on his own, and the other gates soon followed.

**2. The Berlin Wall was erected more than 15 years into the Cold War.**
More than 2 million East Germans, most of them skilled laborers and professionals, fled to the West between 1949 and 1961. The [Soviet Union](https://www.history.com/topics/russia/history-of-the-soviet-union) had rejected East Germany’s original request to build the wall in 1953, but with defections through West Berlin reaching 1,000 people a day by the summer of 1961, Soviet leader [Nikita Khrushchev](https://www.history.com/topics/cold-war/nikita-sergeyevich-khrushchev) finally relented. The residents of Berlin awoke on the morning of August 13, 1961, to find barbed wire fencing had been installed on the border between the city’s east and west sections. Days later, East Germany began to fortify the barrier with concrete.

**3. The Berlin Wall was actually two walls.**
The 27-mile portion of the barrier separating Berlin into east and west consisted of two concrete walls between which was a “death strip” up to 160 yards wide that contained hundreds of watchtowers, miles of anti-vehicle trenches, guard dog runs, floodlights and trip-wire machine guns.

|  |
| --- |
| **Berlin Wall** |
| Berlinermauer.jpgView from the West Berlin side of [graffiti art](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_wall_graffiti_art) on the Wall in 1986. The Wall's "death strip", on the east side of the Wall, here follows the curve of the [Luisenstadt Canal](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Luisenstadt_Canal%22%20%5Co%20%22Luisenstadt%20Canal) (filled in 1932). |
| Berlin-wall-map en.svgMap of the location of the Berlin Wall, showing [checkpoints](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Border_checkpoint) |
| **General information** |
| **Type** | Wall |
| **Country** | * https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/a/a1/Flag_of_East_Germany.svg/23px-Flag_of_East_Germany.svg.png [East Germany](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/East_Germany)
* Flag of East Berlin (1956-1990).svg [East Berlin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/East_Berlin); see [History of Berlin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Berlin#West_and_East_Germany_(1945%E2%80%931990)) for further info
 |
| [**Coordinates**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geographic_coordinate_system) | https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/5/55/WMA_button2b.png/17px-WMA_button2b.png[52.516°N 13.377°E](https://geohack.toolforge.org/geohack.php?pagename=Berlin_Wall&params=52.516_N_13.377_E_region:DE_type:landmark)[Coordinates](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geographic_coordinate_system): https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/5/55/WMA_button2b.png/17px-WMA_button2b.png[52.516°N 13.377°E](https://geohack.toolforge.org/geohack.php?pagename=Berlin_Wall&params=52.516_N_13.377_E_region:DE_type:landmark) |
| **Construction started** | 13 August 1961 |
| **Demolished** | [9 November 1989](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fall_of_the_Berlin_Wall) – 1994[[1]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#cite_note-Chicago_Tribune_1-1) |
| **Dimensions** |
| **Other dimensions** | * Border length around West Berlin: 155 km (96 mi)
* Border length between West Berlin and East Germany: 111.9 km (69.5 mi)
* Border length between West and East Berlin: 43.1 km (26.8 mi)
* Border length through residential areas in East Berlin: 37 km (23 mi)
* Concrete segment of wall height: 3.6 m (11.8 ft)
* Concrete segment of wall length: 106 km (66 mi)
* Wire mesh fencing: 66.5 km (41.3 mi)
* Anti-vehicle trenches length: 105.5 km (65.6 mi)
* Contact/signal fence length: 127.5 km (79.2 mi)
* Column track width: 7 m (7.7 yd)
* Column track length: 124.3 km (77.2 mi)
* Number of watch towers: 302
* Number of bunkers: 20
 |
| **Technical details** |
| **Size** | 155 km (96.3 mi) |