

Mini Research Project: The Fall of the Berlin Wall 1989

(1800 words)

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Introduction: The Construction of the Berlin Wall

The Berlin Wall was constructed in 1961 by the German Democratic Republic (GDR/East Germany) with the approval from the Soviet Union's Premier Nikita Khrushchev. The Berlin wall was actually two walls, not one and measured 155 kilometers in length. By 1989 the wall was guarded by 302 watchtowers and at least 100 people died trying to cross the Berlin wall during its 28-year history.

The purpose of the wall was to divide East and West Berlin to prevent citizens fleeing the communist East to the Capitalist West and was a direct result of what was recognized as the "brain drain" during 1949-1961. The "brain drain" was a mass exodus of approximately 3 million (20% of the population) doctors, engineers, intellectuals and skilled workers from East Germany to West Germany, motivated by higher wages, more opportunities and better standard of living. The mass emigration was in danger of causing an economic collapse which highlighted the ideological conflict, tensions and mistrust between the Communist Soviet Union and Capitalist Western Powers. This led to the wall becoming a power symbol of the Cold War and was significant in highlighting wider divisions within Europe and the ideology of the so-called "Iron Curtain".

Research Focus: The Fall of the Berlin Wall and its historical Significance

This study examines the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the significant role it played in the East/West European divide, as well as its symbolism of the end of the Cold War. It will explore its impact on the decline of communist control in Europe and how it has affected Berlin culturally and economically to this day. This mini research project will use primary documents such as speeches, visuals sources, and secondary sources to support the project.

The Collapse of the Cold War: Eastern European Reform and the Soviet Union

For three decades the Berlin Wall was both a physical and ideological representation of division in Europe which separated the communist German Democratic Republic (GDR) from the democratic West Berlin. The fall of the wall coincided with a shift in political landscapes in Eastern Europe and a collapse in Soviet authorities. This shift was driven by Mikhail Gorbachev's reformist policies which, in practice, marked a departure from the "Brezhnev Doctrine", meaning that the USSR would not intervene in protecting communism. As historian

Mark Kramer argues, the Soviet Union's decision not to intervene militarily in Eastern Europe was a decisive factor in enabling the collapse of communist regimes across the Region¹. The break from the doctrine reduced the threat of Soviet troops and tanks entering the country and paved the way for reformism across Eastern Europe. This shift towards anti-communist reform gave power and momentum to mass protests and many breaches of the so-called "Iron Curtain". Throughout the 1980s Hungary had gradually been introducing reform and utilized the political shift as an opportunity. In August 1989 to be the first country to breach the "Iron Curtain" by opening its borders with Austria. This allowed tens of thousands of visiting East Germans to emigrate to Austria instead of returning home which created a refugee crisis and weakened the East German Regime. Poland then followed by weakening its communist control and introduced democratic reforms, dismantled the Polish United Workers party (30 January 1990) and changed its name from the Polish People's Republic to the Republic of Poland.

The Cause of the Collapse: Weakness and Reform

Whilst Mikhail Gorbachev's weakening of the Brezhnev Doctrine enabled the fall for the Berlin Wall, the event's momentum was rooted in widespread reform and anti-communist ideology and not solely accountable to Soviet policy. Economic stagnation and lack of political freedom were growing within the GDR. This coincided with neighboring countries' large-scale protests and civil unrest with people demanding more freedom, rights, and improved living conditions.

The November 9th Press Conference and "Accidental" Opening of the Wall

The physical fall of the Berlin Wall culminated in a televised press conference held on November 9, 1989, by GDR spokesperson Gunter Schabowski to announce new travel regulations. He started this live broadcast with *"So, we want...through a number of changes, including the travel law, to [create] the chance, the sovereign decision of the citizens to travel wherever they want. (um) We are naturally (um) concerned that the possibilities of this travel regulation—it is still not in effect, it's only a draft."* Crucially, he then declares *"Therefore (um), we have decided today (um) to implement a regulation that allows every citizen of the German Democratic Republic (um) to (um) leave the GDR through any of the border crossings."*

To put this into context, since 1961 until this moment, East Berliners and East Germans had been subjected to severe travel restrictions and were banned from travelling to West Berlin or West German. Any travel between these two restricted areas required very rarely approved authorizations, and any violations often risk imprisonment.

Following such impactful statements from Schabowski, the reporter (Riccardo Ehrman) seeks to clarify the timeline and implementation of such a significant change to the travel law, asking *"When does it come into effect?"*. To which Schabowski responds, *"That comes into effect, according to my information, immediately, without delay (looking through his papers further)."*

¹ Mark Kramer, *The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

This was a significant miscommunication by Schabowski, instead of communicating that East Germans could cross the border after proper procedures were in place, he accidentally announced that East Germans could cross *“immediately”*.

The announcement was widely broadcast to thousands of East Berliners who then travelled to the border demanding access to the crossing. The border guards had not been briefed on the news and were overwhelmed, ultimately allowing them to pass freely into West Berlin. This highlights the instability of the GDR regime and its weakened authority, and that a single ambiguous statement could trigger systematic collapse. As the people of East Berlin started to gather around the wall that night, they began to unpick and dismantle the wall in celebratory scenes that marked a new post-communist, democratic chapter in European history.

Source Analysis: The Night the Wall Fell

Image 1:



In this primary source photo, taken by Robert Wallis at the Berlin Wall in the early hours of 10 November 1989 just hours after the previous evening's broadcast. It highlights the celebratory atmosphere, the powerful and symbolic destruction of what the wall had represented for so long, and the union of people, friends and Germany in what became an infamous image of collective emotion and collapsing of authority. Critically, as a media image, it can be argued that this photograph may fail to represent the deep political and social complexities and overrepresents

triumph and celebration. The image is valuable in representing the general sentiment and experience of such a historical event, but it doesn't serve to accurately portray the full extent of the situation historically. It is significant to note that, as outlined in a profile by *The Times*, the photographer, Robert Wallis was a Western journalist documenting events for an international audience. This suggests that the photograph may reflect the priorities of Western Media at the time which often prioritized symbolic moments and dramatic imagery and can be linked to wider Western media narrative during the Cold War, which often highlighted the weaknesses of communist systems and framed their collapse as celebratory.

Global Impact and the Historical Significance

The sudden collapse of the Berlin Wall was not due to a single action, such as the live television broadcast, but instead was a conclusion to a dynamic, Global period of political change. The fall of the wall not only led to the reunification of East and West Germany, but it also signified the beginning of the ending of the wider global political conflicts that had been occurring since the end of World War 2 in 1949 in the form of the Cold War. Europe had been divided between Western capitalism and Communist Eastern bloc states under the Soviet Union's influence, the fall of the wall marked a symbolic change away from Soviet control in Eastern Europe and away from decades of ideological conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. This had an important and consequential impact on the Soviet Union and contributed to its collapse in 1991, marking an end to global political tensions in the post-World War 2 era. In a speech from Mikhail Gorbachev on 7 October 1989 in East Berlin during the 40th anniversary of East Germany (GDR) and circulated in a BBC News online article, he famously said "*Life punishes those who come too late*"

In this, Gorbachev used a tone of warning to highlight the risks to the communist regime if it chose not to reform urgently. It also supports the argument that the fall of the Berlin Wall was not a result of a single event or action, but as a broader collective of political shifts away from communism support.

Long Term Impact: how the Berlin Wall still shaped Germany today

Although approaching 40 years since the fall of the Berlin Wall, its legacy still shapes Berlin and Germany today. East Germany is generally known for having lower incomes and not as many global industries. In Berlin, the East is seen as more rebellious with less religious centers and is generally more politically left-wing and liberal, whereas the surrounding eastern German regions are more right-wing and far-right. Party support for the far-right AfD and the left-wing Die Linke represent this political division.²

Conclusion

² Lucy Kinski and Simon D. Brause, "Germany: Political Developments and Data in 2024," *European Journal of Political Research Political Data Yearbook*, first published 28 July 2025

The fall of the Berlin Wall remains one of the most significant events of the 20th century. Although not a result of a single action or state, but as a complex culmination of decades of political, ideological and economic tensions between Western Capitalism and Eastern Communism. The fall was driven by the growing demand for social reforms, freedom and mobility across Europe and led to the reunification of Germany and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The impact of the lead up and fall of the Berlin Wall can still be witnessed today in global politics, its shaping of Berlin and Germany's dividing cultures, economies and political and political identities.

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