

The Berlin Wall: How It Rose, How It Fell, and Its Relevance to Current Events

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Introduction

Throughout its history, “Germany served as one of Europe’s favorite battle grounds (Hartmann 1).” Despite achieving unification in 1871, Germany has remained, throughout the majority of its history, “a big, restless country in the heart of Europe (Taylor 43).” Furthermore, that unification was disrupted by events such as the Berlin Wall.

To fully examine the history of the Berlin Wall, one must consider the history of Germany before its construction. One must also understand that the significance of the Berlin Wall today will be determined by how it is remembered. By remembering it fluidly, rather than as an event fixed strictly in the past, there is potential to apply insight to other events in history and to current events. Examining the Berlin Wall, in this way, allows one to engage in the discipline of History in a fluid, ever-relevant experience. In doing so, one is able to realize that the impact of this is a national and global choice, rather than a predetermined fact.

WWI and the Great Depression

The First World War and its consequences are significant to the history of the Berlin Wall because economic depression and the shameful standard of living Germans faced left the country vulnerable to the influence dictators, especially Adolf Hitler. In June of 1919, Germany signed the Treaty of Versailles. The treaty bound Germany to surrender a significant portion of its territory and committed the country to thirty-three billion dollars in reparations. The reparations proved impossible for the Weimer Republic to keep up with. The country would not fully repay the money for thirty-nine years. The failure to make payments angered France. As a result, France seized Germany’s coal mines in the Ruhr Valley. To discourage France, Germany printed money for which it had no backing and paid the miners to resist France by refusing to

work. The combination of the conditions of the Treaty of Versailles and the decision to print currency without hard backing caused the already steep inflation in Germany to skyrocket. The value of Germany currency decreased times a billion. People brought their pay home in wheelbarrows and bought whatever staples could be found with baskets full of cash.

By 1939, conditions in German paralleled the Great Depression of the United States. Factories were forced to close their doors, leaving the majority of Germans without work and often homeless. There was scarcity all around. Farmers, unable to support themselves and employees, left crops to rot or be picked by passersby. Germany fell into despair. Germans became humiliated by their standard of living and the condition of their country. They were desperate change and longing to feel proud of themselves and of Germany.

Adolf Hitler and the National Socialist German Workers Party – WWII

The significance of the Second World War to the Berlin Wall is that the aftermath left Germany, especially Berlin, vulnerable to the influence of occupying powers. Germany was desperate to be stable and proud. In 1933, the Nazi Party's massive propaganda campaign, which promised a new Germany, thrived. Adolf Hitler, portrayed as Germany's champion patriot, promised a Germany united as a respected world power, where Germans were regarded as a "super race." By condemning Jews, Communists, and any demographic that differed from his ideals, Hitler was able to convince many that they were to blame for Germany's shameful collapse. He was also able to convince Germans that he and the Nazi party were the answer to Germany's problems. So, in January of 1933 he was elected Germany's chancellor.

Hitler's fury rolled across Europe. The Nazis invaded Poland in 1939, marking the beginning of WWII. The Nazis rapidly gained territory and in 1940, Italy became Germany's

ally and the two powers set sight on territories in Yugoslavia, Greece, and North Africa. In the same time frame, the German air force began dropping bombs on Britain. In the summer of 1941, Germany made a grave mistake by violating its alliance with the Soviet Union. That and the fact that Japan, Germany's ally, declared war with the United States by bombing Pearl Harbor in 1941, marked the beginning of another brutal ending for Germany. Allied forces began an immediate, relentless retaliation. Germany was pounded by Allied bombs for four years and in April of 1945, allied soldiers reached German soil. The United States agreed to allow Soviet Union soldiers seize Berlin, an event that foreshadowed the ruined city's future.

Post WWII - Berlin Divided

On May 8, 1945 Germany surrendered unconditionally. The Soviets destroyed the telephone system, stripped what was left of industrial plants, and seized surviving crops and cattle. Sewage leaked into streets, there was no police or fire department, and the makeshift hospitals had inadequate supplies to treat even simple ailments. The most sought after goods on the black market were soap, food, and cigarettes. Because the United States remembered how Germany suffered after WWI, it sent aid to Berlin in the form of care packages, supplies, and the eradication of rat infestations. Hospitals, adequate nutrition, and sanitation were the top priorities. In early November 1945, the Soviet Union erected a war memorial in Berlin. It featured a sixty-five foot Soviet soldier flanked by two T-34 battle tanks.

The European Advisory Commission agreed to divide Berlin into three zones, one each for the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union. In February of 1945, the three powers met at the Yalta Conference in Crimea, Ukraine. United States president Franklin D. Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill convinced Joseph Stalin that France deserved a zone in Berlin. So, the city became divided into four zones, each administered by the occupying country.

It was also decided that Poland would be given to Russia and that Germany owed twenty billion dollars in reparations, half of which was given to Russia. Roosevelt died in April 1945. The debate over how much impact that event had on the outcome of Berlin continues to this day.

In July of the same year, the day after the United States detonated the first successful atomic bomb, United States President Harry S. Truman met with Churchill and Stalin at the Potsdam conference. There, they determined the border of West Germany and agreed that the eastern border would be decided when a peace settlement was reached. That day never came. It was decided that Germany would never possess a military force again and that no nuclear weapons would be stored on its soil. They discussed what to do with Berlin and reached the conclusion that it would be established as a special territory administered by all four occupying countries. These divisions were meant to be temporary until Germany became united again and Germans were able to vote for their government. The last minute, rushed migration from east to west began immediately.

The Iron Curtain Descended

The British zone controlled the production of steel and coal, but did not have access to adequate food. The United States and Soviet zones had adequate access to food, but lacked sufficient fuel supplies. The differences in ideology quickly became apparent. The Soviets justified stripping anything useful as reparations. The Germans were told that they were victims of Hitler, an imperialist from the West. They were told that the German Socialist Unity Party would allow them to build the lives they deserved. Meanwhile, the Allies planned to unite their three zones into one and encouraged Germans to find a democratic self-government. In 1946 and 1947, elections were held to establish local governments and state legislatures.

The United States provided financial aid to European restoration. The Truman Doctrine helped Greece and Turkey resist the Soviet Union. Tension built up between the Soviet Union and the Allies, particularly the United States. As the Allies finalized the establishment of West German and issued West German marks, the Soviet Union issued its own currency in East Germany. Stalin began his famous blockade in June 1948, resulting in the Berlin Air Lift.

In West Berlin, money from the Allies, particularly the United States, flooded in and restoration was in full swing. Unemployment became an issue of the past for West Germans as the reconstruction of their zone led to economic and social stability. In May of 1949, the Federal Republic of Germany was officially established. In September of the same year, West Germans participated in the first national election since 1932 and elected Konrad Adenauer as chancellor. Bonn was established as a temporary capital, until Berlin could be whole again. As West Germany healed, it became increasingly apparent that the East was not in synch. To West Berlin, its sister in the east became, more or less, a hostage.

On October 7, 1949 East Germany became the German Democratic Republic. Despite the positive connotations of its name, the constitution was only good on paper. The government chose the candidates and voters appeared, often against their wills, to demonstrate “approval.” Wilhelm Pieck was appointed the first president and East Berlin was chosen as the capital. The government was dominated by the Communist Socialist Unity party.

1953 Uprising – Barbed Wire Sunday – Checkpoint Charlie

On March 5 1953, Nikita Khrushchev, after the death of Stalin, was appointed leader of the Soviet Union. In June of that year, disillusioned East Berliners crowded in Alexanderplatz, East Berlin’s main square, to demonstrate their frustrations. The event became violent and, in

some cases with the help of local authorities, police stations were stormed to free political prisoners. The chaos boiled until the Soviet Union was called to dispatch soldiers. Eight hundred East Berliners died in the resulting conflicts. In the following months, rumors about government plans to build a physical barrier between West Berlin and East Berlin earned the attention of international news and media outlets. At a press conference in June 1961, Walter Ulbricht said, in response to questioning, "I am not aware of any such intention. Our building workers are busy erecting new houses. Nobody wants a wall (Epler 50)." Just two months later, his statement was proven to be part of a cover up. The government had in fact been planning to begin the construction of the Berlin Wall as it is remembered today, the wall that is often referred to as "The Wall of Shame."

On August 13, 1961 a train bound for West Berlin was stopped and passengers were forced back to East Berlin on foot. When they arrived home, they were told that there was a ban on all traffic leaving East Berlin. Telephone lines leaving East Berlin were cut. Guarded by Soviet Soldiers, workers began to dig concrete and raise posts to support rolls of barbed wire. The day became known as "Barbed Wire Sunday," the day that it became apparent to the world that peace would not be coming to Berlin.

On October 7, 1961 the world held its breath as ten United States tanks faced ten Soviet tanks for sixteen hours. The threat of nuclear war was fresh on the minds of people across the globe. The standoff was triggered by the fact that East German guards requested passports from United States officials as they passed Checkpoint Charlie, the main crossing point for the American sector of West Berlin. Both sides refused compliance and the world anticipated disaster until both sides eventually retreated.

Boiling Point - The Fall

As the occupying forces struggled to govern Berlin, the global political climate reached a boiling point. Cold War politics and hysteria cycled. The Vietnam Conflict burned. The Soviet Union struggled to shrug rebellion in several of its territories. Leaders, critical to the success of finding balance between the worlds superpowers, died or were replaced at a rate that forced rapid, sometimes carless adjustment. Politicians all over the world were stretched to the limits of their talents. The world was exhausted.

In Germany, change was coming. In 1989, Hungary and Czechoslovakia opened their borders, allowing over forty thousand East Germans to seek refuge in Western embassies. In Berlin, the news spread like wildfire. Politicians made sweeping promises in an attempt to curb migration and, on November 9, promised travel permits between East and West Berlin would once again be granted. Hope burned in the hearts of many as they gathered on either side to see if what they had heard was true. The government, realizing that to do otherwise would be futile, did not interfere as the crowd gained confidence and, disregarding talk about permits, surged forward on either side. By midnight, travel between East and West was in full swing.

Reunification

At midnight on October 3, 1990 Germany celebrated its official unification day by raising its flag in front of the Reichstag building. Unity was not achieved without difficulty. Germans were required to exercise patience and keep open minds as the government, economy, and culture slowly stabilized. The famed “two plus four talks” of 1990 and Germany’s admission to NATO did a great deal to change its context in global conversations. Slowly, Germany became the country as it is known today. Germany is one of Europe’s most stable, powerful economies

and its government and rich culture influences global politics, academia, technology, and many other industries throughout the world. Today, the goals are to promote an accurate understanding of why those differences were apparent and what can be done to avoid repetition of that disparity.

Remembering

October 3, 2015 marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of German unification. This milestone also drew attention to “Generation 25,” the generation born after the Wall fell in 1989. Media coverage showed that the walls in peoples’ minds have dropped, that Germans now recall the differences between East Germans and West Germans with a new perspective. The majority of those who remember a divided Berlin agree that the Wall has become an icon of freedom rather than a source of great shame. Though they will never forget the terrible oppression of the East, it is the fall that remains significant in their minds. When interviewed, one woman who lived in East Berlin recalled that, while people were afraid on the night of the fall, what kept them strong enough to push through the barriers was the determination to achieve the freedom to choose, both for themselves and their country. She said, “What tipped the balance was the feeling of being caged. I just thought: right now, enough is enough (Millington).”

Any nostalgia expressed by former East Germans comes from the difficulties of having to assimilate to a culture that they had been deprived of for nearly thirty years. Seeking employment, finding adequate housing, and adjusting to the shock of the cultural gap took years for some. There is also the fact that younger generations are remembering the Wall differently than they. Checkpoint Charlie, now located across from a large McDonalds, is a popular, campy photo opportunity for tourist. Graffiti and merchandise found in certain tourist districts portray the history of German in a very tongue-in-cheek manner. Older Germans worry that the humor

might overwhelm the significance of their history. However, younger people argue that being able to display it in this manner is a symbol of cultural renewal and a truly healed Germany.

Conclusions

Germany, nearly two generations removed from the Berlin Wall, is now a country with a stable, powerful European economy and a rich culture. It is influential in political climates, industries, and academic disciplines throughout the world. Its unique history is of great interest to experts invested in History as an academic discipline. In recent years, the state of foreign affairs has led to an increase in texts that examine events in Germany in the context of how insight gained from those outcomes can help provide resolutions for problems faced today.

In the journal *History Teacher*, historian Helmut Langerbein published an essay titled “Great Blunders?: The Great Wall of China, the Berlin Wall, and the Proposed United States/Mexico Border Fence.” In this text, he demonstrates the significance of the Berlin Wall to current events by portraying it as an economic and social failure that parallels that of the Great Wall of China. He also discusses walls as a symbol of failure throughout history. These concepts are easily applied to current events, such immigration and refugee debates.

By approaching the Berlin Wall as a fluid, relevant event nations today open themselves to valuable insight capable of preventing mistakes that would lead to economic and social failure. That realization is significant because today’s societies are increasingly globalized, a fact that is revolutionizing the concepts of nationality citizenship. As societies evolve, it is essential that people everywhere make their far reaching decisions informed. Building the future on a precise understanding of the past will allow the world to achieve global unity.

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