

S6 The Berlin Wall

The Berlin Wall stood as a symbol of oppression for almost three decades. Its iconic structure and reach, which divided a nation, could be felt all around the world. The history of the Berlin Wall allows us a glimpse of a world struggling to recover from the Second World War.

Dividing east and west

Germany was unsure of its future after its defeat in World War II. During a pair of Allied Peace conferences in Yalta and Potsdam, it was decided to split Germany into four 'allied zones.' The eastern part of the country went to the Soviet Union and the western part to the United States, Britain and eventually France. Even though Berlin sits entirely in the east of Germany, the city was divided similarly during the Yalta and Potsdam agreements.

Berlin Airlift

Relations between East and West were so bad that Russia started planning to drive the United States, Britain, and France out of Berlin. In 1948, a blockade of West Berlin was set up by the Soviets. They wanted to starve the Allies out of the city by blocking off access to West Berlin. The United States and its allies retaliated by supplying their sectors of the city from the air. It became known as the Berlin Airlift, and over the course of a year, the allied nations flew in more than 2.3 million tons of food, fuel and other goods. The Soviets ended the blockade and a period of calm followed.

The arrival of a wall

There was a period of about a decade when things remained relatively calm. However, tensions flared again in 1958 when the Soviets began to threaten West Berlin again. This was brought on by the number of refugees, mostly skilled workers, who had decided to move from east to west. Over the next three years,

the flood of refugees continued to leave the German Democratic Republic (East Germany). On August 12, 1961, around 2,400 people crossed over the border in one day. This compelled Soviet leader Khrushchev to give the East German government permission to close the border for good, preventing emigrants from crossing over into West Germany. The construction of the Berlin Wall began and though it slowed down the number of people trying to escape, over 5,000 East Germans managed to make the journey to the west. Unfortunately, about 170 lost their lives while attempting to cross.

The fall of the wall

Nearly three decades later, as the Cold War began to thaw, on November 9, 1989 the spokesman for East Berlin's Communist Party announced a change in his city's travel ban with the West. He stated that citizens of the GDR were free to cross the city's borders. East and West Berliners flocked to the wall, drinking beer and champagne and chanting 'Tor auf!' (Open the gate!). The guards, though confused and overwhelmed, opened the checkpoints and suddenly the city was reunited. Over 2 million people gathered in the street to participate in the celebration. As quickly as it had arrived, it seemed the Berlin Wall would fall and Germany was reunited for the first time since 1945.