

# The Fall of the Berlin Wall

## The Night That Changed the World

*Discover how a misunderstood press conference, decades of Cold War tension, and the courage of ordinary citizens combine...*

B2 Reading · 35 min · History

### 1 Before You Read — Reflect & Discuss

Consider the following questions and discuss with a partner or your teacher:

1. What do you know about the Berlin Wall? When was it built, and why?
2. Have you ever visited Berlin or seen images of the Wall? What impression did it make on you?
3. Can you think of other walls or barriers — physical or political — that have divided people? What happened to them?

### 2 Reading

#### A Wall Falls, A World Changes: November 9, 1989

On the evening of November 9, 1989, a mid-ranking East German government **spokesman** named Günter Schabowski held a routine press conference in East Berlin. Near the end, a journalist asked when new travel regulations — allowing East Germans to visit the West — would take effect. Schabowski, who had not been properly **briefed**, shuffled through his notes, looked up, and said: "As far as I know, this takes effect immediately, without delay." Within hours, tens of thousands of East Berliners flooded to the checkpoints of the Berlin Wall, demanding to cross. Overwhelmed and without clear orders, the border guards stepped aside. The Wall — the most powerful symbol of the Cold War division of Europe — had effectively fallen, brought down not by an army but by a **bureaucratic** mistake and the unstoppable momentum of popular will.

#### Why the Wall Was Built

To understand the significance of November 9, it is necessary to go back to the end of World War II. In 1945, defeated Germany was divided into four **occupation** zones controlled by the United

States, Britain, France, and the Soviet Union. Berlin, located deep within the Soviet zone, was similarly divided. As Cold War **tensions** escalated, the Western zones merged to form the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany), while the Soviet zone became the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) — a **communist** state aligned with Moscow.

Throughout the 1950s, East Germans fled westward in enormous numbers — approximately 3.5 million by 1961 — seeking political freedom and economic opportunity. This mass **exodus** was devastating for the East German economy and deeply embarrassing for the communist regime, which claimed to represent a superior system. On August 13, 1961, East German authorities began constructing a barrier of barbed wire and concrete blocks through the heart of Berlin. Within weeks, it became a fortified wall — 155 kilometres long, patrolled by armed guards with orders to shoot anyone attempting to cross. Families were separated overnight. Streets that had been open for centuries were sealed. Berlin became two cities divided by **concrete**, ideology, and fear.

### Life in the Shadow of the Wall

For 28 years, the Berlin Wall stood as the physical **manifestation** of the Iron Curtain — the ideological and political boundary that divided Europe into Western democratic nations and Eastern communist states. Life on either side was starkly different. West Berlin, supported by Western economies, became a vibrant, **prosperous** city — a symbol of freedom and resilience. East Berlin, controlled by the **authoritarian** Socialist Unity Party, was marked by surveillance, restricted movement, censorship, and a pervasive atmosphere of distrust.

Despite the danger, an estimated 5,000 people attempted to escape across the Wall during its existence. They used tunnels, hot air balloons, modified cars with hidden compartments, and even zip lines strung between buildings. At least 140 people were killed in the attempt. For those who remained, the Wall was not merely a physical barrier — it was a **psychological** one, shaping every aspect of daily life and creating a generation that grew up believing the division was permanent.

### The Forces That Brought It Down

The fall of the Wall did not happen in isolation. By the late 1980s, the Soviet Union, under Mikhail Gorbachev's policies of **glasnost** (openness) and **perestroika** (restructuring), was loosening its grip on Eastern Europe. Reform movements were spreading: Poland held semi-free elections in June 1989; Hungary opened its border with Austria in September, allowing thousands of East Germans to flee westward through a third country. Across East Germany, massive peaceful **demonstrations** — particularly the Monday protests in Leipzig, where hundreds of thousands marched chanting "We are the people!" — put enormous pressure on the government.

The regime, weakened and **discredited**, attempted to respond with limited reforms — including the new travel regulations that Schabowski so fatefully **misannounced**. What was intended as a controlled, bureaucratic adjustment became, through confusion and popular momentum, one of the most dramatic and joyful moments of the twentieth century.

## The Aftermath and Legacy

The fall of the Wall set in motion the rapid **reunification** of Germany, formally completed on October 3, 1990. It also marked the beginning of the end of the Cold War and the collapse of communist regimes across Eastern Europe. Within two years, the Soviet Union itself had dissolved.

The legacy of the Wall, however, extends far beyond geopolitics. It demonstrated that even the most seemingly permanent structures of oppression can be dismantled — sometimes suddenly, sometimes through the accumulated pressure of ordinary people refusing to accept the **status quo**. It also left deep scars: the economic and psychological differences between eastern and western Germany — known as the "inner wall" — persisted for decades and, in some respects, continue to this day.

Every year on November 9, people in Berlin and around the world **commemorate** the fall of the Wall — not merely as a historical event, but as a reminder that freedom is never guaranteed, that walls can be built as quickly as they fall, and that the courage of ordinary citizens can reshape the course of history.

## 3 Key Vocabulary

Word / Phrase	Definition	Example Sentence
<b>spokesman</b>	a person who makes statements on behalf of a group or organisation	Schabowski was a mid-ranking government spokesman.
<b>briefed</b>	given detailed information or instructions in advance	Schabowski had not been properly briefed on the new regulations.
<b>bureaucratic</b>	relating to complicated official rules and procedures	The Wall fell partly due to a bureaucratic mistake.
<b>occupation</b>	the control of a country by a foreign military force	Germany was divided into four occupation zones after WWII.
<b>tensions</b>	a state of hostility or strained relations between parties	Cold War tensions escalated between East and West.
<b>communist</b>	relating to a political system in which the state controls the economy and limits individual freedoms	East Germany was a communist state aligned with Moscow.
<b>exodus</b>	a mass departure of people from a place	The exodus of East Germans was devastating for the regime.

Word / Phrase	Definition	Example Sentence
<b>concrete</b>	a hard building material; also used figuratively for something solid and real	The Wall was a barrier of concrete, ideology, and fear.
<b>manifestation</b>	a visible expression or display of something	The Wall was the physical manifestation of the Iron Curtain.
<b>prosperous</b>	successful, especially in financial or economic terms	West Berlin became a vibrant, prosperous city.
<b>authoritarian</b>	favouring strict obedience to authority at the expense of personal freedom	East Berlin was controlled by the authoritarian ruling party.
<b>psychological</b>	relating to the mind and mental processes	The Wall was not just physical — it was a psychological barrier.
<b>glasnost</b>	a Russian word meaning 'openness'; Gorbachev's policy of greater transparency in government	Glasnost allowed more open discussion of political and social issues.
<b>perestroika</b>	a Russian word meaning 'restructuring'; Gorbachev's programme of economic and political reform	Perestroika aimed to modernise the Soviet economic system.
<b>demonstrations</b>	public gatherings to express protest or support for a cause	Massive peaceful demonstrations put pressure on the government.
<b>discredited</b>	having lost the trust or respect of others	The weakened and discredited regime attempted limited reforms.
<b>misannounced</b>	announced incorrectly or with inaccurate information	Schabowski misannounced the travel regulations, triggering the Wall's fall.
<b>reunification</b>	the process of reuniting something that was divided	The fall of the Wall led to the rapid reunification of Germany.
<b>status quo</b>	the existing state of affairs; the current situation	Ordinary people refused to accept the status quo.
<b>commemorate</b>	to honour the memory of an important event or person	Every year, people commemorate the fall of the Berlin Wall.

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## Useful Collocations

Cold War · Iron Curtain · border crossing · political freedom · mass protest · peaceful demonstration · communist regime · military occupation · national reunification · ideological divide · press conference · surveillance state · reform movement · democratic transition · historical legacy · border guard

## 5 Reading Comprehension

**1. What directly triggered the opening of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989?**

- a) A military invasion by Western forces
- b) A misunderstood announcement at a press conference about new travel regulations ✓**
- c) An official government decision to demolish the Wall
- d) A diplomatic agreement between the US and the Soviet Union

**2. Why was the Berlin Wall built in 1961?**

- a) To protect East Germany from a Western military invasion
- b) To stop the mass exodus of East Germans fleeing to the West ✓**
- c) To mark the official border agreed at the end of World War II
- d) To create a tourist attraction

**3. How many people are estimated to have been killed trying to cross the Wall?**

- a) Approximately 20
- b) At least 140 ✓**
- c) Over 5,000
- d) None — the guards never used lethal force

**4. What were glasnost and perestroika?**

- a) East German protest movements
- b) Soviet policies of openness and economic restructuring introduced by Gorbachev ✓**
- c) Western military operations during the Cold War
- d) Names of border crossing points in Berlin

**5. What role did the Monday protests in Leipzig play?**

- a) They were violent uprisings that were quickly suppressed
- b) They put massive peaceful pressure on the East German government to reform ✓**
- c) They demanded that the Wall be made higher and stronger
- d) They were organised by the West German government

**6. What happened to Germany after the Wall fell?**

- a) It was divided into even more zones
- b) East and West Germany were formally reunified on October 3, 1990 ✓**
- c) It became part of the Soviet Union
- d) A civil war broke out between East and West

**7. What lasting legacy does the text attribute to the fall of the Berlin Wall?**

- a) It proved that military force is the only way to achieve political change
- b) It showed that seemingly permanent structures of oppression can be dismantled by ordinary people ✓**
- c) It demonstrated that walls are always effective at controlling populations
- d) It had no lasting significance beyond Germany

**6****Vocabulary Exercise — Fill in the Blanks**

**briefed · bureaucratic · exodus · manifestation · authoritarian · demonstrations · discredited · reunification · status quo · commemorate**

1. Schabowski had not been properly \_\_\_\_\_ on the details of the new travel regulations.
2. The fall of the Wall was triggered partly by a \_\_\_\_\_ mistake at a press conference.
3. The mass \_\_\_\_\_ of East Germans in the 1950s was devastating for the communist economy.
4. The Berlin Wall was the physical \_\_\_\_\_ of the ideological divide between East and West.
5. East Berlin was controlled by an \_\_\_\_\_ regime that restricted movement and free speech.
6. Massive peaceful \_\_\_\_\_ in Leipzig put enormous pressure on the East German government.
7. The weakened and \_\_\_\_\_ regime attempted limited reforms that backfired dramatically.
8. The fall of the Wall led to the rapid \_\_\_\_\_ of East and West Germany.
9. Ordinary citizens refused to accept the \_\_\_\_\_ and demanded fundamental change.
10. Every year, people around the world \_\_\_\_\_ the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9.

## 7

## Answer Key

### Vocabulary Exercise Answers

1. briefed
2. bureaucratic
3. exodus
4. manifestation
5. authoritarian
6. demonstrations
7. discredited
8. reunification
9. status quo
10. commemorate

## 8

## Grammar Focus — Key Structures in the Text

### B2 Grammar: Narrative Tenses, Participle Clauses & Reported Speech

**Past perfect for background:** Schabowski, who **had not been** properly briefed, shuffled through his notes.

**Participle clause (result):** **Overwhelmed and without clear orders**, the border guards stepped aside.

**Passive narrative:** Families **were separated** overnight. Streets **were sealed**.

**Reported speech:** Schabowski **said that** the new regulations **took** effect immediately.

**Inversion for dramatic effect:** Within hours, tens of thousands **flooded** to the checkpoints.

## 9

## Speaking & Writing Tasks

### Speaking Task

Discuss these questions with a partner or your teacher:

- Why do you think Schabowski's mistake had such an enormous impact? Could the Wall have fallen without it?
- The text describes the Monday protesters chanting 'We are the people!' Why is this phrase so powerful in a democratic context?
- Do you think the differences between eastern and western Germany still matter today? Why or why not?
- Can you think of a modern example where ordinary people's actions changed the course of history?

### Useful Phrases for Discussion

**What makes this event so remarkable is** that the Wall fell not through military force but through a combination of popular pressure and bureaucratic confusion.

**The text illustrates how** seemingly permanent political structures can collapse with surprising speed.

**It is striking that** one person's misunderstanding at a press conference could trigger such a momentous historical event.

**This resonates with the broader idea that** ordinary citizens have the power to reshape history when they act collectively.

### Writing Task

Write a structured essay (180–230 words) on the following topic:

"The fall of the Berlin Wall shows that even the most powerful barriers can be brought down when ordinary people refuse to accept the status quo." Using evidence from the text, discuss to what extent you agree with this statement.

Your essay should include an introduction, supporting paragraphs with evidence from the text, and a conclusion with your personal reflection. Use vocabulary from this lesson.