

The building of the Berlin Wall

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The building of the Berlin Wall

During the 1950s, the City of Berlin was still divided into a Western zone, consisting of the American, British and French sectors, and a Soviet zone. Berlin constituted a thermometer during every international crisis, registering the degree of seriousness of the crisis. The Western Allied powers were determined to uphold their rights in the former capital of the Reich. For the Communist Government of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), West Berlin was a constant provocation, as it was an easy escape route for many East Germans who wanted to flee the country.

In 1953, production levels in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) were poor. In order to stimulate production, the Socialist Unity Party (SED), led by the Stalinist Walter Ulbricht, imposed increasingly severe working conditions on the workforce. However, he did not offer in exchange any prospect of an improvement in the people's standard of living. East Berliners noted with envy the ever-increasing economic prosperity in the Western sectors.

On 16 and 17 June 1953, strikes broke out in East Berlin and spread rapidly throughout East Germany. These uprisings, however, were brutally put down by Soviet troops, leaving many dead and injured. The defeat of the June 1953 riots resulted in several hundred thousand East Germans fleeing to the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). More than two million people had crossed from East to West in less than ten years.

In order to stop this mass exodus, which particularly weakened the country's economy, the GDR finally prevented people crossing to the West. During the night of 12 to 13 August 1961, East German workers, flanked by soldiers, built a wall between East and West Berlin that made passage impossible.

The Western powers, resigned, could only register their verbal protests. During a visit to Berlin on 26 June 1963, US President John F. Kennedy expressed his sympathy for West Berlin by declaring 'Ich bin ein Berliner'.

In practice, it was virtually impossible to cross the 'wall of shame'. This closed border became the most tangible symbol of the Cold War and the division of Europe.