

explainity explains: The Berlin Wall

This is Carsten. With many others, on November 9th 1989, he was standing on the east side of the Berlin Wall, within the German Democratic Republic. They were all there to witness the fall of the wall which, for decades, had separated East and West Berlin.

But let's go back in time. It all started after the end of the Second World War. Germany was divided up into four zones between the victorious powers, and so was Berlin, which at that time was the capital of the Reich. However, the Soviet Union had different intentions from the three Western occupying powers.

Consequently, in 1949 two states were founded: the democratic Federal Republic of Germany in the west, and the socialist GDR in the east. Berlin was also split into two.

The government of the GDR wanted to prevent people from leaving the country. For this reason, from 1952 on, the internal border in Germany was fenced off and closely watched.

Nevertheless, in the spring of '61, the bad economic situation of the GDR led to a new mass exodus, some of it via the last remaining "open" border crossing in Berlin, from East to West Germany.

During the night of August 13th, the GDR began to eventually close this route, too. Within the blink of an eye, barbed wire fences and a concrete barrier were in position. The Berlin Wall was continually extended until 1975.

Let's skip to autumn 1989:

Faced with growing financial problems, the reform policy of the Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachev, peaceful demonstrations and growing emigration and escape movements, the GDR government felt increasingly under pressure.

GDR citizens who had fled to the West German Embassy in Hungary received permission to travel through Austria on to the FRG.

Soon, East Germans who had taken refuge in the Prague embassy were also officially permitted to emigrate into the West. By certain/special trains, directly through the GDR.

At the same time, October '89 brought a transition of power in the GDR government and the drafting of a new emigration law.

On November 9, during a press conference shortly before 7 pm, the new travel law was read out. Although officially it had not yet been put into effect and emigration had to be previously applied for and authorized, it had been mistakenly proclaimed that the law was valid "from now on, with immediate effect". As a result, the news quickly spread through the media: "The wall is open."

Carsten and a cheering crowd of thousands headed for the border. At the Bornholmer Strasse crossing point, overwhelmed border agents gradually gave way to the pressure of the people and it was here that people were allowed to cross the border into the West before anybody else.

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That very night people started tearing down parts of the wall on both the East and West Berlin side. That day marked the end of the GDR and the beginning of German reunification.

On July 1st, 1990, all border controls were permanently abolished. The official date of “German Unity Day” is October 3rd, 1990.

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