The Rise and Fall of the Berlin Wall

What Was the Berlin Wall?
The Berlin Wall was both the physical division between West Berlin and East Germany from 1961 to 1989 and the symbolic boundary between democracy and Communism during the Cold War.

Overview of the Berlin Wall
The Berlin Wall was erected in the dead of night and for 28 years kept East Germans from fleeing to the West. Its destruction, which was nearly as instantaneous as its creation, was celebrated around the world.

A Divided Berlin
At the end of World War II, the Allied powers divided conquered Germany into four zones, each occupied by either the United States, Great Britain, France, or the Soviet Union (as agreed at the Potsdam Conference). The same was done with Germany's capital city, Berlin.

As the relationship between the Soviet Union and the other three Allied powers quickly disintegrated, the cooperative atmosphere of the occupation of Germany turned competitive and aggressive. Although an eventual reunification of Germany had been intended, the new relationship between the Allied powers turned Germany into West versus East, democracy versus Communism.

In 1949, this new organization of Germany became official when the three zones occupied by the United States, Great Britain, and France combined to form West Germany (the Federal Republic of Germany). The zone occupied by the Soviet Union quickly followed by forming East Germany (the German Democratic Republic).

This same division into West and East occurred in Berlin. Since the city of Berlin had been situated entirely within the Soviet zone of occupation, West Berlin became an island of democracy within Communist East Germany.

Mass Emigration
Within a short period of time after the war, living conditions in West Germany and East Germany became distinctly different. With the help and support of its occupying powers, West Germany set up a capitalist society and experienced such a rapid growth of their economy that it became known as the "economic miracle." With hard work, individuals living in West Germany were able to live well, buy gadgets and appliances, and to travel as they wished.

Nearly the opposite was true in East Germany. Since the Soviet Union had viewed their zone as a spoil of war, the Soviets pilfered factory equipment and other valuable assets from their zone and shipped them back to the Soviet Union. When East Germany became its own country, it was under the direct influence of the Soviet Union and thus a Communist society was established. In East Germany, the economy dragged and individual freedoms were severely restricted.

By the late 1950s, many people living in East Germany wanted out. No longer able to stand the repressive living conditions of East Germany, they would pack up their bags and head to West Berlin. Although some of them would be stopped on their way, hundreds of thousands of others made it across the border. Once across, these refugees were housed in warehouses and then flown to West Germany. Many of those who escaped were young, trained professionals. By the early 1960s, East Germany was rapidly losing both its labor force and its population.

Having already lost 2.5 million people by 1961, East Germany desperately needed to stop this mass exodus. The obvious leak was the easy access East Germans had to West Berlin. With the
support of the Soviet Union, there had been several attempts to simply take over West Berlin in order to eliminate this exit point. Although the Soviet Union even threatened the United States with the use of nuclear weapons over this issue, the United States and other Western countries were committed to defending West Berlin.

Desperate to keep its citizens, East Germany decided to build a wall to prevent them from crossing the border.

**The Berlin Wall Goes Up**
There had been rumors that something might happen to tighten the border of East and West Berlin, but no one was expecting the speed nor the absoluteness of the Wall.

Just past midnight on the night of August 12-13, 1961, trucks with soldiers and construction workers rumbled through East Berlin. While most Berliners were sleeping, these crews began tearing up streets that entered into West Berlin, dug holes to put up concrete posts, and strung barbed wire all across the border between East and West Berlin. Telephone wires between East and West Berlin were also cut.

Berliners were shocked when they woke up that morning. What had once been a very fluid border was now rigid. No longer could East Berliners cross the border for operas, plays, soccer games, etc. No longer could the approximately 60,000 commuters head to West Berlin for well-paying jobs. No longer could families, friends, and lovers cross the border to meet their loved ones. Whichever side of the border one went to sleep on during the night of August 12, they were stuck on that side for decades.

**The Size and Scope of the Berlin Wall**
The Berlin Wall stretched over a hundred miles. It ran not only through the center of Berlin, but also wrapped around West Berlin, entirely cutting West Berlin off from the rest of East Germany.

The wall itself went through four major transformations during its 28-year history. The Berlin Wall started out as a barbed-wire fence with concrete posts, but just a few days after the first fence was placed, it was quickly replaced with a sturdier, more permanent structure made out of concrete blocks, topped with barbed wire.

The first two versions of the wall (barbed wire and concrete blocks) were replaced by the third version of the Berlin Wall in 1965. This version consisted of a concrete wall, supported by steel girders.

The fourth version of the Berlin Wall, constructed from 1975 to 1980, was the most complicated and thorough. It consisted of concrete slabs reaching nearly 12-feet high (3.6 m) and 4-feet wide (1.2 m), plus it had a smooth pipe running across the top to hinder people from scaling the Wall.

The Berlin Wall began as a simple fence but evolved over time into a complex deterrent system. By the time the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, there was a 300-foot No-Man's-Land, an additional inner wall, soldiers patrolling with dogs, a raked ground that showed footprints, anti-vehicle trenches, electric fences, massive light systems, watchtowers, bunkers, and minefields.

**Checkpoints**
Although most of the border between East and West consisted of layers of preventative measures, there were little more than a handful of official openings along the Berlin Wall. These openings, called checkpoints, were for the infrequent use of officials and others with special permission to cross the border.
The most famous of these was Checkpoint Charlie, located on the border between East and West Berlin at Friedrichstrasse. Checkpoint Charlie was the main access point for Allied personnel and Westerners to cross the border. (Soon after the Berlin Wall was built, Checkpoint Charlie became an icon of the Cold War and was frequently featured in movies and books set during this time period.)

**Escape Attempts**
The Berlin Wall did prevent the majority of East Germans from emigrating to the West, but it did not prevent them all. During the history of the Berlin Wall, it is estimated that about 5,000 people made it safely across.

Some early successful attempts were simple, like throwing a rope over the Berlin Wall and climbing up. Others were brash, like ramming a truck or bus into the Berlin Wall and making a run for it. Still others were suicidal, like jumping from the not-yet-boarded-up, upper-story windows of apartment buildings that bordered the Berlin Wall.

As the Berlin Wall became stronger and larger, the escape attempts became more planned and more complex. Some people dug tunnels from the basements of buildings in East Berlin, under the Berlin Wall, and into West Berlin. Another group saved scraps of cloth and built a hot air balloon and flew over the Wall.

Unfortunately, not all escape attempts were successful. Since the East German guards were allowed to shoot anyone nearing the eastern side of the Berlin Wall without warning, there was always a chance of death in any and all escape plots. It is estimated that somewhere between 100 and 200 East Germans died while attempting to cross the Berlin Wall.

One of the most infamous cases of a failed attempt occurred on August 17, 1962. In the early afternoon, two 18-year-old young men ran toward the Wall with the intention on scaling it. The first of the young men to reach the Berlin Wall successfully scaled it. The second one, Peter Fechter, was not so lucky. As he was about to scale the Wall, a border guard opened fire. Peter continued to climb the Wall, but ran out of energy just as he reached the top. He then tumbled back onto the East German side of the Berlin Wall. To the shock of the world, Peter was just left there. The East German guards did not shoot him again nor did they go to his aid. Peter shouted in agony for nearly an hour. Once he had bled to death, East German guards carried off his body. He became the 50th person to die at the Berlin Wall and a symbol of the struggle for freedom.

**The Fall of the Berlin Wall**
The fall of the Berlin Wall happened nearly as suddenly as its rise. There had been signs that the Communist bloc was weakening, but the East German Communist leaders insisted that East Germany just needed a moderate change rather than a drastic revolution. East German citizens did not agree.

As Communism began to falter in Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia in 1988 and 1989, new exodus points were opened to East Germans who wanted to flee to the West. Then suddenly, on the evening of November 9, 1989, an announcement made by East German government official Günter Schabowski stated, "Permanent relocations can be done through all border checkpoints between the GDR (East Germany) into the FRG (West Germany) or West Berlin."
People were in shock. Were the borders really open? East Germans tentatively approached the border and indeed found that the border guards were letting people cross. Very quickly, the Berlin Wall was inundated with people from both sides. Some began chipping at the Berlin Wall with hammers and chisels. There was an impromptu huge celebration along the Berlin Wall, with people hugging, kissing, singing, cheering, and crying.

The Berlin Wall was eventually chipped away, into smaller pieces (some the size of a coin and others in big slabs). The pieces have become collectibles and are stored in both homes and museums.

After the Berlin Wall came down, East and West Germany reunified into a single German state on October 3, 1990.