

**COLD WAR (1945-  
1991): FALL OF THE  
BERLIN WALL 1989**



# **COLD WAR (1945-1991): FALL OF THE BERLIN WALL 1989**

## **Description**

Through the use of various primary and secondary sources, including primary source video news recordings from the night the wall fell, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the events leading up to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, how the wall had come to symbolize the Cold War, and what the collapse of the Wall meant for Germany, Eastern Europe and the World.

## **Subjects**

European History  
World History

## **Grade Level**

11-12

## **Duration**

90 minutes

## **Tour Links**

- Brandenburg Gate, Berlin
- Berlin Wall Memorial, Berlin

## **Essential Questions**

- What was the Berlin Wall? Why was it put up in 1961? How was it seen by officials on both sides of the Cold War?
- Why did the Berlin Wall become a symbol of the Iron Curtain during the Cold War?
- Why did the Berlin Wall come down in 1989? How did Germans react? How did the rest of the world react?

# Academic Summary

## **Bill Wheatley, NBC News**

... Nov. 9, dawned, there was no inkling of the monumental event that would take place within hours. The NBC correspondents on the scene continued working on a variety of stories. Looking for a same-day news angle, Tom and a crew journeyed into East Berlin to cover an early-evening press conference given by the government's propaganda minister. Not much news was expected, but the hope was that perhaps the session would provide a sound bite or two for that night's program.

The press conference began and the minister droned on about potential reforms. Then, near the end, an Italian journalist asked about the right of East Germans to travel. The startling answer: East Germans would henceforth be free to travel into West Berlin and West Germany.

The reporters present weren't sure that they had heard right. East Germans were free to leave the country? When? "Immediately," the official told the stunned audience.

Within moments, Tom was on the car phone to New York and then coast-to-coast on our network with an "NBC News Special Report": an official had declared that East Germans were "free to travel." In effect, the Berlin Wall was about to fall.

Meanwhile, many East Germans, having seen the news briefing on television, were heading for the border crossings to see if what they had just heard could possibly be true. When they got there, seemingly nothing had changed: the border remained closed. (The minister had been wrong in one respect: the change wasn't scheduled to take place until the next day.)

Back in New York, it was late afternoon and a scramble was under way at Nightly News, complicated by the fact that no one was really certain that the East German official's statement would hold up. A new program rundown was created, topped with the events in Berlin, plus Washington's reaction.

A backgrounder on the history of the wall, scheduled to air the following night, was freshened and inserted. And a staffer at the Boston bureau was dispatched to the Kennedy Library to obtain rare color footage of President John F. Kennedy's famous "I Am a Berliner" speech from June 26, 1963. The speech, made just 22 months after the Communists erected the Berlin Wall, helped underline the United States unwavering support for West Germany and was a huge morale booster for those living under the regime.

As the clock ticked toward airtime, the NBC phone lines between New York and Berlin buzzed constantly.

Then, the dam broke.

East German border guards, apparently worried that rioting might erupt among the big crowds at the crossing points, opened the gates between East and West. Tens of thousands of East Berliners surged through the crossings. It was an extraordinary scene ...

## **NBC Nightly News, 09 Nov 1989**

### **(video transcript excerpt)**

NBC Nightly News with Tom Brokaw

Tonight from West Berlin ...

Good Evening. Live from the Berlin Wall on one of the most historic nights in this wall's history.

What you see behind me is a celebration of this new policy, announced today by the East German government, that now, for the first time since the wall

was erected in 1961, people will be able to move through freely. This crowd has gathered here tonight spontaneously.

From the East German side they have been training water cannon on some of the celebrants, as you can see, on some of the celebrants, but it doesn't seem to make much difference.

The West German police have moved in here suggesting that they move back, saying that the situation is already complicated enough, but it doesn't seem to make any difference. The people are here to celebrate freedom, for the East Germans, freedom to travel, a primary right for people anywhere in the world.

... the wall as we have known it since 1961, a sinister symbol of oppression... the wall has changed dramatically tonight.

09 Nov 1989 ...

Millions of people around the world sat glued to their televisions that night watching events many thought they would never see. The Berlin Wall was falling. Berliners, East and West, were streaming across border checkpoints at will. Young people were dancing in the streets and climbing on the wall. Champagne and other alcoholic beverages flowed freely in a joyous celebration. Some people were singing. Others were crying, unable to hold back emotions built up over a lifetime. It was one of the great moments in history, and it was all live on TV. Berlin was divided no longer.

The city had been split among the four main allied powers in 1945 when the Nazi regime collapsed at the end of the Second World War. East Berlin was given to the Soviets. West Berlin was given to the French, the British and the Americans. The arrangement, a wartime agreement between the occupying powers forged before the end of the war, was supposed to be temporary, but within two years tensions between the Soviet Bloc and the Western powers had increased to a point that the division became permanent. By 1947, the western allies had merged their sections into the city of West Berlin. Over the next decade, thousands of East Germans defected to the west. Officially, the border between West Germany and East Germany was closed in 1952, but there was a loophole in Berlin, a city deep inside East Germany. Anyone making it to West Berlin could then go to other parts of the west. By the end of the 1950s, Berlin had become the focal point for the Cold War as both sides stood armed to the teeth ready for action.

On Sunday morning, 13 Aug 1961, workers in Berlin began to close the border by putting up barbed wire fences. East German soldiers stood guard with orders to shoot anyone trying to defect. Eventually, a full concrete wall was erected, physically isolating West Berlin from the world. Crossing the border was still possible for some, but it was heavily restricted. Most East Berliners were forbidden from crossing. Over the next three decades, over 100 people would die trying to cross the wall, including 67 would-be crossers who were shot by border guards. The vast majority of those killed were young people in their twenties. Many of the shootings were caught on camera or video by western journalists stationed in West Berlin. By the mid-1960s, the Berlin Wall had become the worldwide tangible symbol of the Cold War and the Iron Curtain. In 1963, American President John F. Kennedy visited the city and gave a famous speech in support of West Berliners.

Just as the armed stalemate between the West and the Eastern Bloc came to a head in the 1980s, however, glimmers of change began to radiate out of Moscow. Mikhail Gorbachev took over as General Secretary of the Soviet Union in 1985. Knowing the USSR was rotting internally, one of his first moves was to announce the new Soviet policies of Perestroika (Restructuring) and Glasnost (Openness). Perestroika would focus on reforming the Soviet economy. Glasnost would bring political and social reforms. People around the world took notice. Much to the dismay of older, conservative members of the Politburo, radical elements across the Soviet Bloc quickly began to

clamor for independence and freedom. On 12 Jun 1987, American President Ronald Reagan gave a speech in front of the Brandenburg Gate near the Berlin Wall in which he issued a challenge to Gorbachev to “tear down this wall!” East German leaders, by that time perhaps the hardest of hardline communists in the Soviet Bloc, however, resisted change.

By 1989, Gorbachev was putting pressure on East German communist leaders to embrace reform or face the consequences. In May, Hungary, once a staunch communist and repressive country, opened its borders with Austria. A mass exodus of East Germans through that border followed. Almost spontaneously, thousands more began scaling the walls of the West German embassies in Prague, Warsaw and Budapest. The Czechs tried to close their border with East Germany to help stop the flow, but the move backfired as hundreds of thousands took to the streets in protest across the Eastern Bloc. On 08 Nov, the entire East German Politburo resigned. The next day, in a news conference carried around the world, new government officials tried to calm the situation by announcing that all the border crossings would be opened up. It was a decision that forever changed history.

Through the use of various primary and secondary sources, including primary source video news recordings from the night the wall fell, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the events leading up to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, how the wall had come to symbolize the Cold War, and what the collapse of the Wall meant for Germany, Eastern Europe and the World.

## Objectives

1. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain the events leading up to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.
2. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how the Berlin Wall came to symbolize the Cold War.
3. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain what the collapse of the Berlin Wall meant for Germany, Eastern Europe and the World.

# Procedures

## I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: Does any country have the right to a “sphere of influence”? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of the primary sources and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

## II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – Fall of the Berlin Wall (20 min)
- Video – NBC broadcast (15 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the sources and articles on the fall of the Berlin Wall. (20 min)
- Suggestion: Students should read some of the articles for homework.
- Suggestion: Break students into groups and assign different articles to each group.
- Suggestion: AP/Advanced students should concentrate on primary sources.
- Group Activity – Socratic Discussion: Discussion on the Fall of the Berlin Wall (20 min)

## III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay / DBQ: Explain in detail the events leading up to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, how the wall had come to symbolize the Cold War, and what the collapse of the Wall meant for Germany, Eastern Europe and the World.

## Extension

### On tour: Berlin Wall Memorial, Berlin

While on tour, students can visit the Berlin Wall Memorial, where they can see for themselves one of the last remnants of the wall. This section is now preserved as a memorial to all Germans, especially those who lost their lives trying to escape East Berlin. Most of the wall was torn down in the days and weeks after its fall (souvenirs are everywhere – watch for fakes), but it was decided that this section would be left as a reminder. The memorial is open free of charge year round. Guided tours in German and/or English are available. The memorial also has special programs for students. Please see the website below.

# Web Links

## Lesson Plan Websites

- [https://chnm.gmu.edu/1989/archive/files/thatcher,-speech-10-nov-1989\\_53531a9531.pdf](https://chnm.gmu.edu/1989/archive/files/thatcher,-speech-10-nov-1989_53531a9531.pdf)  
Margaret Thatcher (English Prime Minister) – Remarks on the Fall of the Wall, 10 Nov 1989 (primary source)
- [www.berliner-mauer-gedenkstaette.de/en/the-berlin-wall-10.html](http://www.berliner-mauer-gedenkstaette.de/en/the-berlin-wall-10.html)  
Berlin Wall Memorial (primary and secondary sources) – from the Official Berlin Wall Memorial website
- [www.history.com/topics/cold-war/berlin-wall](http://www.history.com/topics/cold-war/berlin-wall)  
The Berlin Wall (website) – from the History Channel
- [www.johndclare.net/Basics\\_ColdWar.htm](http://www.johndclare.net/Basics_ColdWar.htm)  
The Cold War 1945-1963 (website)
- <http://chnm.gmu.edu/1989/exhibits/intro/1989revolutions>  
1989 Revolutions in Eastern Europe (website) – from George Mason University (VA). This website is a great resource for teachers, as it contains primary and secondary sources on what happened in the different countries of Eastern Europe in 1989. There are also teaching points and suggestions.
- [www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/audio/history/pdf/the\\_start\\_of\\_the\\_cold\\_war.pdf](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/audio/history/pdf/the_start_of_the_cold_war.pdf)  
The Start of the Cold War (PDF worksheet) – produced for schools from the BBC
- [www.thenagain.info/webchron/world/yaltaconf.html](http://www.thenagain.info/webchron/world/yaltaconf.html)  
Yalta Conference of 1945 (website)
- <http://historum.com/european-history/67179-behind-iron-curtain.html>  
Behind the Iron Curtain (website)
- [www.slideshare.net/carolinesm/the-berlin-wall-2416548](http://www.slideshare.net/carolinesm/the-berlin-wall-2416548)  
The Berlin Wall (PowerPoint)
- [www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1](http://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1)  
Reading like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video). Great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvoor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA. Highly recommended for teachers.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=gUgoWPe2hPc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gUgoWPe2hPc)  
The Origins of the Cold War: Yalta and Potsdam (video). 7-minute video specifically designed to explain the basics to students. Highly recommended for all students and teachers.
- <http://www.nbcnews.com/video/nbc-news/33587980/#33587980>  
NBC Nightly News broadcast, 09 Nov 1989 (primary source)
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=fjNz1lvXgzU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fjNz1lvXgzU)  
BBC Broadcast – Fall of the Berlin Wall
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=MM2qq5J5A1s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MM2qq5J5A1s)  
Moments in History – The Fall of the Berlin Wall (video). Short 6-minute documentary that shows the events leading up to the fall of the wall. Outstanding resource and highly recommended for all students.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=GCO9BYCGNeY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GCO9BYCGNeY)  
Ronald Reagan “Mr. Gorbachev, Tear Down this Wall!” (video) – 2-minute excerpt
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=n4RjJKxsamQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n4RjJKxsamQ)  
Scorpions – Winds of Change (video). Music video by the Scorpions of their worldwide hit “Winds of Change”, written in 1990 in the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall. In multiple polls in Germany, the song is seen as the “song of the 20th century.” Produced in English and Russian versions (though interestingly, not German), the video, which contains scenes from Berlin before, during and after the Wall’s collapse, is shown on German TV every year at exactly 10:45 pm on 09 Nov,

- the time and date when the gates were thrown open by East German soldiers.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=jnCPdLIUgvo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jnCPdLIUgvo)  
Nov 9, 1989: The Berlin Wall Falls (video) – 3-minute ABC News special report from the night the Wall fell
  - [www.youtube.com/watch?v=AtFYi7jqmdk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AtFYi7jqmdk)  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=gWLc5JjXFRc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gWLc5JjXFRc)  
Rise and Fall of the Berlin Wall (video). This History Channel documentary, at almost 2 hours for both parts, is probably too long for most in-class showings, but is highly recommended as an out-of-class assignment, especially for AP/advanced students.

## **Background Information**

- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin\\_wall](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_wall)  
Berlin Wall – Wikipedia article
- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/East\\_Germany](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/East_Germany)  
East Germany – Wikipedia article
- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eastern\\_Bloc](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eastern_Bloc)  
Eastern Bloc – Wikipedia article
- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/East\\_Berlin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/East_Berlin)  
East Berlin – Wikipedia article
- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cold\\_War](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cold_War)  
Cold War – Wikipedia article

## **Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans**

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/germany/cold-war-fall-of-the-berlin-wall-1989](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/germany/cold-war-fall-of-the-berlin-wall-1989)  
Cold War (1947-1991) – Fall of the Berlin Wall 1989
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/russia/nato-vs-warsaw-pact](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/russia/nato-vs-warsaw-pact)  
Cold War (1947-1991) – NATO vs. Warsaw Pact
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/russia/cold-war-iron-curtain](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/russia/cold-war-iron-curtain)  
Cold War (1947-1991) – Russia's Iron Curtain
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/czech/prague-spring-of-1968](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/czech/prague-spring-of-1968)  
Communist Czechoslovakia (1848-1989) – Prague Spring of 1968

## **Key Terms**

- Berlin Wall
- Cold War
- East Berlin
- East Germany
- Eastern Bloc
- Iron Curtain
- Sphere of Influence
- West Berlin
- West Germany



