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with Reading Museum Service

GERMAN REUNIFICATION G19



At the end of the Second World War Germany was occupied by armies from a number of different countries. The east had been captured by the Russian Red Army, while the west was in the hands of American, British and French troops. This led to problems, as the political and economic systems of the countries occupying the west and east were opposed to each other.

After the initial joy at the defeat of Hitler the occupying powers became hostile towards each other. Rather than co-operating to rebuild the broken country, Germany was partitioned in 1949 into two antagonistic parts - the German Democratic Republic in the east (also referred to as East Germany or the GDR) and the Federal Republic of Germany in the west (also referred to as West Germany or the FRG). The situation was made more complicated by the fact that the city of Berlin, which is located in the centre of East Germany, was also divided into two parts.

As the two states became established the GDR found that large numbers of people preferred living in the FRG. It is estimated that between 1949 and 1961 approximately 2.5 million people crossed from the east to the west, most via the still open border in the city of Berlin, while approximately 200,000 crossed in the other direction. The drain of East Germany's population into West Germany was very damaging for the East German economy and society.

The leaders of East Germany became uneasy at the situation in the early 1950s. In 1952 the GDR began fortifying the inner German border to choke off the flow of people. A barbed-wire fence 1.2 m (4 ft) high was constructed along the length of the border. A 5 km (3.1 mile) wide Restricted Zone (or Sperrzone), ran along the border.



It is believed that 11,000 people on the GDR side living near the border were moved away, losing their homes, farms and businesses. Entire towns and villages were divided by the border, most famously Mödlareuth in Thuringia, which had a fortified wall across the middle of it (left - this is now a museum). Those people that remained could only travel in an eastward direction and were not permitted to visit neighbouring villages.

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The border between East and West Berlin was also tightened, although it was not closed at this stage. By the end of September 1952, about 200 of the 277 streets which ran from the Western sectors to the East were closed to traffic (right) and the remainder were subjected to constant police observation.





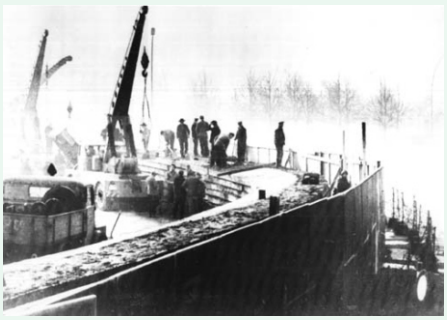
The famous Berlin Wall was also constructed in 1961, closing the last loophole in the GDR's border system by cutting off the Western sectors of Berlin from East Berlin and the GDR. The border around West Berlin had remained open since 1952 despite the closure and fortification of the main inner German border. However, thousands of East Germans continued to cross to the west via Berlin, prompting the GDR government to stem the flow with the construction of the Wall.





The East German government described the Wall as an 'anti-Fascist protective rampart', however it was clearly also designed to prevent movement from the east to the west. From the day construction began on 13 August 1961 until it was dismantled in 1989 it is believed that approximately 5,000 people successfully escaped across it into West Berlin (left - an escapee is pulled through the wire), although 125 people were killed in the attempt. Successful methods of escape included long tunnels, hot air balloons and driving a car (modified so that the roof would break off) underneath the road barriers! West Berliners were allowed to approach the wall, resulting in that side of the wall becoming covered in graffiti.

1961





1986

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In the late 1980s the leadership of the ruling Russian Communist party tried to reform the political system in the country. This led, in 1989, to a loss of control over eastern European countries such as Czechoslovakia, Hungary and, eventually, East Germany. In 1990-1991 the Soviet Union itself broke apart.

The collapse of Communist rule in East Germany was triggered in September 1989 when Hungary dropped border restrictions with western Europe. Within days 13,000 East Germans travelled to the west via Hungary.



Protest demonstrations against border restrictions broke out all over East Germany in September 1989. Initially, they were of people wanting to leave to the West, chanting 'Wir wollen raus! (We want out!). Then protestors began to chant 'Wir bleiben hier, (We're staying here!). This was the start of what East Germans generally call the 'Peaceful Revolution' of late 1989.

The leader of East Germany, Erich Honecker, resigned on 18 October 1989. There were continual demonstrations and public meetings held in the shelter of Lutheran churches. In Leipzig demonstrators gathered every Monday (Montagsdemonstrationen - above right). On 4 November a million demonstrators gathered in Alexanderplatz in East Berlin. On 9 November Egon Krenz, the new East German leader, agreed to allow people to travel directly through crossing points between East Germany and West Germany, including West Berlin.



The new situation was supposed to take effect on 10 November. However, on the evening of 9 November thousands of East Berliners flooded the checkpoints in the Wall demanding entry into West Berlin. The guards were caught unprepared and there was no way for the vastly outnumbered soldiers to hold back the huge crowd. Unwilling to shoot, the guards finally yielded, opening the checkpoints and allowing people through with little or no identity checking. Ecstatic East Berliners were soon greeted by West Berliners on the other side in jubilation. Many people danced on top of the once forbidden wall. 9 November is considered the date the Wall fell.



Above Right: East German Trabant cars drive across the border unimpeded on the night of 9 November.

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Following the collapse of travel restrictions events moved rapidly. Free elections took place in East Germany on 18 March 1990. Negotiations then took place to re-unite the two parts of the country. The two parts of the country became a single entity on 3 October 1990, the day which is now celebrated as the Day of German Unity (Tag der Deutschen Einheit).

All the ojects in this box were collected by Mr Roger Kent, an employee of the Museum of Reading, who visited the country for the reunification celebrations. Before 3 October the East German police and army were still operational, but afterwards they were disbanded and many sold their uniforms to souvenir hunters.



These two photographs were taken during Mr Kent's visit. The upper photograph shows the last East German guard at the Neue Wache - a grand building on the main street of Berlin, the Unter den Linden, which was the country's national war memorial. The photograph on the left shows Mr Kent at the same spot on the following day, after the guards had been removed. In 1993 the Neue Wache was rededicated as the 'Central Memorial of the Federal Republic of Germany for the Victims of War and Tyranny.'

Two Flags



The flag of Germany is a tricolour, consisting of three equal horizontal bands coloured (from top to bottom) black, red and gold. In the 1830s and 1840s black-red-gold flags were used by German liberals and they were officially adopted for the national flag at the Frankfurt Parliament of the German National Assembly founded in 1848.

The flags of both West and East Germany were identical until 1959 when a socialist coat-of-arms was added to the flag of the German Democratic Republic. The coat-of-arms contains a hammer (symbolising workers) and a compass (symbolising intellectuals) inside ears of grain (symbolising farmers).

Both of these flags were originally East German, but one of them has had the socialist coat-of-arms removed to create a united national flag - if you look carefully you can see the stitch holes which originally held the coat-of-arms!

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GERMAN REUNIFICATION G19

Two NVA Caps & a Winter Hat



The East German National People's Army (Nationale Volksarmee in German, usually shortened to NVA) was created on 1 March 1956. At the end of the Second World War the German army, the Wehrmacht, was disbanded. National security was in the hands of the four occupying powers. However, increasing tensions between East and West Germany in the 1950s inevitably led to the creation of two separate armies. The West German Federal Defence Force (Bundewehr) was formed slightly before the East German NVA, in November 1955.



Until 1962 the NVA was an all-volunteer army. After the introduction of conscription, the troop strength of the NVA lay at around 170,000. Conscription was for at least 18 months and adult males between 18 and 26 were eligible. Following protests by the Lutheran Church, East Germany was the only Warsaw Pact country which allowed those who objected to military service to work in what were called 'Construction Units'.



Soldiers in the NVA wore stone-grey uniforms. Protective helmets were worn on active service or for ceremonial duties (left and below). Caps were worn around the barracks or for routine maintenance operations (right). Fur hats were worn in winter.



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German Currency



Following the total destruction of the state at the end of the Second World War, the old Reichsmark was practically worthless. On 21 June 1948, the Deutsche Mark replaced the Reichsmark in West Germany. The old Reichsmark was still legal tender in the Soviet occupation zone, but the new currency flooded into the eastern region too. This caused sudden inflation and the cash supplies of East Germany became worthless overnight. In July 1948, a completely new series of East German Marks was issued. It had the official name Deutsche Mark until 1964, but it was also known, especially in the west, as the Ostmark, or East mark.

At re-unification in 1990 the West German Deutsche Mark became the official currency of the whole country. East Germans exchanged their notes for West German currency. Almost all the paper money of East Germany (about 100 billion Mark^{s}, or 620 million banknotes with a volume of 4,500 m^{3}) was stored in long sandstone caverns. In 2002 this money, which was supposed to have rotted away, had to be burned.

The West German 10 Deutsche Mark note shows a portrait of Anton Neuparer by the sixteenth century artist Albrecht Dürer on one side. The reverse shows a training ship, the *Gorch Fock*, which was built in 1958. This banknote design was used from 1963 to 1995.

The Two Deutsche Mark coin shows Ludwig Erhard (1897-1977) who was Chancellor of West Germany from 1963 until 1966. This coin was issued between 1988 and 2001.

The East German Five Mark note shows Thomas Munzer (1490-1525), a Protestant leader of the Peasant's War of 1525, which was partly directed against economic injustice. The East German Mark notes featured various heroes of the Marxist view of history - Friedrich Engels on the 50 Mark note and Karl Marx on the 100 Mark note. The reverse of the note shows a row of combine harvesters processing grain. This note was issued in 1975.



Left: East German 10 Mark note from 1971 showing Clara Zetkin, a socialist and feminist.

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Grenztruppen Hats



The East German National People's Army (Nationale Volksarmee/NVA) was divided into four branches - the Landstreitkräfte (Ground Forces), the Volksmarine (People's Navy), the Luftstreitkräfte/ Luftverteidigung (Air Force / Air Defence) and the Grenztruppen der DDR (Border Troops of the GDR).

There were probably about 50,000 border guards, an immense number of men whose sole task was to patrol the border fences and walls. Other than the Soviet Union, no other Warsaw Pact country had such a large border guard force. In contrast to the massive efforts along the borders with the West, there were only about 600 Grenztruppen assigned to guard the borders with Czechoslovakia and Poland. It was the Grenztruppen who shot people attempting to escape, although 37 Grenztruppen were themselves killed during escape attempts.



The border troops had their own dark green arm-of-service colour and their service and dress uniforms bore a green cuff title with white lettering - Grenztruppen der DDR - on the left arm. From 1973 on, service in the Grenztruppen was voluntary.



Fur hats were worn out of doors in winter (above left). Caps were used on ceremonial occasions or by officers (right) checking the papers of travellers passing through the GDR's Grenzübergangsstellen (border crossing points).



The photograph on the left was taken on the 10 November 1989, when the Grenztruppen suddenly found themselves without a purpose. Cars can be seen streaming across the border in the background. Oberstleutnant der Grenztruppen Manfred Winkelmann looks slightly at a loss for words!

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Piece of the Berlin Wall



In the days and weeks that followed the breaching of the border on 9 November 1989, people came to the Berlin Wall with sledgehammers in order to chip off souvenirs, demolishing lengthy parts of it in the process. These people were nicknamed Mauerspechte (wall woodpeckers, left). Many of the chunks were sold and found their way around the world. Some large sections have been erected as memorials to the Cold War period. The photograph below right shows a section of this kind outside the Imperial War Museum in London.





Little is now left of the Wall at its original site, which was destroyed almost everywhere. None of the three short sections that remain accurately represent the Wall's original appearance. They are badly damaged by souvenir seekers and their eastern sides are now covered in graffiti that did not exist before unification. In many places, though, the course of the wall is still marked, often simply by a line across the road (left).



Two Publications

The small booklet was produced in East Germany shortly before the collapse of the Berlin Wall. It uses words and pictures to paint a rosy picture of life in the GDR. The larger publication is in German and was produced for the reunification celebrations on 3 October 1990.

