

Read the stories related to the Berlin Wall and answer the questions that follow.

Plans for a Wall Around West Berlin

Soviet Leader Nikita Khrushchev and Walter Ulbricht, one of the founders of East Germany, were close allies. But which of the two men was responsible for the construction of the Berlin Wall? Never had a regime locked up its own population. The border between the two Germanys had been sealed off for some time, but when the Wall went up, the loophole into West Berlin, through which East Germans had been able to flee to West Germany, was also closed.

In 1960 alone, roughly 200,000 East Germans fled from empty supermarket shelves -- and the Stasi secret police -- to West Germany. The two leaders met on August 1, 1961 to discuss ways of stopping the exodus of East Germans through Berlin.

Khrushchev had an idea of taking advantage of tensions with the West and laying an "iron ring around Berlin." He pointed out that "many engineers" had already left East Germany, and that something had to be done.

Ulbricht was also in favor of walling in the East Germans because, as he said, "there are many issues that cannot be resolved with an open border."

At the meeting, a furious Khrushchev told Ulbricht: "When I attended your party convention two years ago, everything was fine. What happened? You wanted to pull ahead of West Germany by 1961/62."

Ulbricht objected, "The population is making demands that cannot be met."

He shifted the blame for East Germany's poor economy to his comrades from Poland and Bulgaria, who -- contrary to agreements -- were supplying neither steel nor coal. But most of all, he said, it was the fault of the West German government. Ulbricht claimed they were "preparing an uprising to take place in the fall of 1961."

"We will give you one or two weeks to make the necessary economic preparations," Khrushchev told him, "Then you will convene the parliament and issue the following communiqué: 'Beginning tomorrow, checkpoints will be erected and transit will be prohibited. Anyone who wishes to cross the border can do so only with the permission of certain authorities of the German Democratic Republic [East Germany].'"

Khrushchev wanted to convince East Germans that the wall would protect them from Western spies, and he said that the Germans would understand. But even he didn't appear to believe his own propaganda. When Ulbricht told him that he wanted to bring his economic experts into the loop, Khrushchev advised him otherwise. "You should not explain anything before the introduction of the new border regime. It would only strengthen the flow of people leaving."

Source: <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/110206>

1. Why were East Germans leaving through West Berlin and not along the border between East and West Germany?
2. What two countries did East German leader Walter Ulbricht blame for his country's economic woes?
3. What did Soviet Leader Nikita Khrushchev want the East Germans to believe was the function of the wall around West Berlin? What was the real function of the Berlin Wall?
4. Why didn't Khrushchev want anyone to know about the creation of the wall before it was built?

Building of the Berlin Wall

After Germany was defeated in World War 2, the Allies divided the country into occupation zones. America, France, England, and the Soviet Union each oversaw a region of Germany. The German capital of Berlin, which lay in the Soviet zone, was also divided into 4 sectors. America, France, and England promoted capitalism and democracy. The Soviet Union, however, rebuilt Germany under their form of communism.

Between 1949 and 1961, about 3.5 million East Germans fled from East to West Germany, seeking freedom and the stronger

economy. Many of those who fled were skilled workers, professionals, and intellectuals. Their loss threatened to destroy the economic viability of the East German state. In response, East Germany built a barrier to close off East Germans' access to West Berlin and hence West Germany. That

barrier, the Berlin Wall, was first erected on the night of August 12–13, 1961.

The original wall of barbed wire and cinder blocks was later replaced by a series of tall concrete walls topped with barbed wire and guarded with watchtowers, gun emplacements, and mines.

By the 1980s that system of walls, electrified fences, and fortifications extended 26 miles through Berlin, dividing the two parts of the city, and extended a further 70 miles around West Berlin, separating it from the rest of East Germany.



5. How many East Germans fled to the west between 1949 and 1961?

6. Why was the flow of people out of East Germany an issue for the country?

7. How long was the Berlin Wall?

The Death Strip

In June 1962, a second fence was built parallel to the wall, about 110 yards farther into East German territory. The houses contained between the fences were razed and the inhabitants relocated, thus establishing what later became known as the “death strip”. The death strip was covered with raked sand or gravel, rendering footprints easy to notice. This made detecting trespassers easier and enabled officers to see which guards had neglected their task. It offered no cover; and, most importantly, it offered clear fields of fire for the Wall guards.

Also serving as a barrier were barbed wire, dogs on long lines, beds of nails known as “Stalin's Carpet,” over 116 watchtowers, and 20 bunkers with hundreds of armed guards.

If an escapee was wounded in a crossing attempt and lay on the death strip, Westerners could not intervene for fear of triggering fire from the East Berlin border guards, even if the injured escapee was just feet away. The guards often let fugitives bleed to death in the middle of this ground, as in the most notorious failed attempt, that of 18-year-old Peter Fechter. He was shot and bled to death, in full view of the Western media in August 1962. The last person to be shot and killed while trying to cross the border was Chris Gueffroy in February 1989. Between 1961 and 1989, about 140 people died trying to escape.



Checkpoint Charlie

Checkpoint Charlie was set up in August 1961, when the Berlin Wall was erected by communist East Germany to prevent its citizens from fleeing to the democratic West. Checkpoint Charlie was one of several crossings around Berlin (others were Checkpoint Alpha and Bravo) where Westerners would be allowed in, but East Germans were not allowed out.



Charlie was notable for its location on Friedrichstrasse, a historic street in the American-occupied city center. Even more important was that it was the only gateway where East Germany allowed Allied diplomats, military personnel, and foreign tourists to pass into Berlin's Soviet sector. In response, the United States, France and Britain stationed military police at Checkpoint Charlie to ensure their officials had ready access to the border. Allied guards monitored diplomatic

and military traffic, but they were also on hand to register and provide information to travelers before they ventured beyond the Wall.

8. How many people are known to have died trying to escape East Germany between 1961 and 1989?

9. Who was allowed through Checkpoint Charlie?

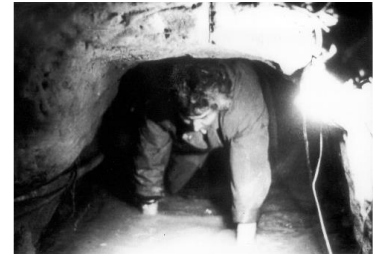
Escaping East Germany

In 1963, a small group of students set out to dig a tunnel underneath the Berlin Wall. This daring group was in West Berlin though and planned to dig their way *into* East Berlin to rescue friends and family trapped behind the impenetrable wall.

Construction on the tunnel began at a closed bakery along the border. From the bakery's entrance, you could see the East German guard towers looming over the wall. About 20 students lived in the bakery for weeks-long shifts and the digging took five months. They dug down about 36 feet with spades and small shovels and then needed to dig 500 feet under the wall.

The men digging weren't sure where exactly they would emerge on the eastern side, and considered themselves lucky when, upon breaking ground, they found themselves inside an abandoned shed behind an apartment building.

The tunnel was ready on October 3, 1964. They sent word to all the people they had been digging to – sisters, brothers, cousins, parents – telling them when to come to whisper the code word, “Tokyo” (the location of that year's Olympics) to West Berliners who would show them the tunnel opening. A *Fluchthelfer* (literally an ‘escape-helper’), watched the street to make sure it was clear.



On the second night, East German border guards noticed something was off and knocked on the door. They didn't know the password, but a West German helper opened the door and they pushed passed him. One of the students, Christian Zobel, opened fire, the bullet piercing the shoulder of young East German guard Egon Schultz, who was then fatally wounded by friendly fire from another guard. Another student, Reinhard Furrer (who went on to become an astronaut) dove into the tunnel to warn those going through and was the last to crawl to freedom in the West.

The tunnel became known as Tunnel 57 because 57 men, women, and children escaped East Berlin in the two nights it was open.

There are many tales of ingenious and well-thought out escape plans from people desperate to flee from East to West Berlin. Wolfgang Engels' wasn't one of them. It was, however, one of the most daring. Engels' plan to flee East Germany 51 years ago was simple: Steal a tank; Point it at the Berlin Wall; Step on the gas. He assumed that he could crash straight through and run to freedom.

Engels was an East German soldier. In April 1963, on the eve of May Day celebrations, he stole an armored personnel carrier (APC) and rammed it into the Berlin Wall in an attempt to escape into West Berlin.



“I’m getting out of here to the West, anyone want to come along?” the teenage Engels shouted over the roar of the nine-ton vehicle’s engine to some youths standing by the road near the Wall. No one did, unsurprisingly, since most people considered trying to escape East Germany an act of madness, punishable by at least two years in jail or death from the border guards’ rifles.

The APC didn't fully penetrate the wall, so Engels exited and was shot twice while struggling to free himself from barbed wire. He was pulled to safety by West Berliners and taken to a nearby bar. He would later recover from his wounds in a West German hospital.

Aircraft mechanic Hans Peter Strelczyk was inspired by an East German TV program on the history of ballooning to make his escape. Together with his friend Gunter Wetzel, he made a hot air balloon to carry both their families into the west. The friends built the engine from propane cylinders and their wives stitched together bedsheets for the balloon.

As searchlights swept menacingly over the heavily guarded border between East and West Germany, a ragged patchwork balloon leisurely floated across the wall of fortifications, minefields, self-firing explosives and guard towers on September 16, 1979.

After about 30 minutes, the balloon carrying Strelczyk, Wetzel, their wives, and four children crashed in a blackberry bush on West German soil. The group became local celebrities afterwards. Residents of the West German town of Naila, near the landing site, offered them food, money, clothes, apartments, and jobs.

Austrian Heinz Meixner worked in communist East Berlin and his passport allowed him to pass through Checkpoint Charlie. While in East Berlin he met Margarete Thureau and they'd fallen in love. However, as an East Berliner, she was not permitted to leave to the West. Meixner couldn't stand to allow Margarete and her family remain trapped behind the Berlin Wall. One evening when stopped at the checkpoint to West Berlin, he measured the height of the gate. He then surveyed rental car agencies for a car low enough to speed under it.

His plan was to find a quick convertible, remove the windshield, and speed through the gate as fast as possible. On a Sunday morning in May 1963 Meixner picked up Margarete and her mother and hid them in the back of his small, rented Austin-Healey Sprite. He removed the windshield, let air out of the tires to lower it, and lined the trunk with bricks to protect them from gunfire.

As they Checkpoint Charlie on the East Berlin side he flashed his passport to the guard, who motioned him to pull over. Instead, Heinz floored the accelerator. Before the stunned guards



could fire their machine guns, Meixner ducked his head down and rocketed into West Berlin. He was traveling so fast that when he finally hit the brakes, the tires left 96-foot-long skid marks.

After the American guards recovered from their shock, they welcomed the group to West Berlin. Meixner told the Americans, "I figured it would take the guards three seconds to draw their weapons once they knew what I was doing. I knew Margarete's mother was protected by the bricks. I felt I could make it with about three inches to spare . . . Now we can get married."

10. How many east Germans escaped using Tunnel 57? Were there any deaths associated with the tunnel escape?

11. Did Wolfgang Engles successfully escape East Germany with his armored vehicle?

12. What did the Strelczyks and Wetzels use to make their escape balloon?

13. What was Austrian Heinz Meixner's motive for help free Margarete Thureau and her mother from East Germany?