

30 Years Ago: The Fall of the Berlin Wall

On Nov. 9, 1989, the symbol of communist oppression in Europe – the Berlin Wall – began tumbling down

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In the waning moments of World War II in Europe, when the defeat of Germany was inevitable, it became a race to Berlin. The Allies and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) had worked together to topple Germany, but now they were concerned about the influence of the other following the conflict. Each wanted to shape post-war Europe with their own vision. Neither side could predict that mindset would turn into the Cold War and the standoff would last more than 40 years.

What to do with Germany was one of the major decision points of the peace conferences following World War II. The decision ultimately came down to splitting Germany into four occupation zones. Great Britain, France and the United States shared the western portion and the Soviet Union occupied the eastern section.

Shortly after the occupation zones were split, the Soviet Union made a power grab for the entire city of Berlin, surrounding it in a blockade. The U.S.-led Berlin Airlift provided more than 2.3 million tons of food by air for more than a year before the USSR retreated.

With the original agreement back in place, people began to flee the Soviet-controlled eastern area in droves. In the decade following the USSR's blockade of Berlin, estimates reported that nearly 3 million people left communist, eastern Europe. Many worked in highly trained or professional occupations like doctors, teachers and business owners, which infuriated and embarrassed the Soviet Union. The Allies welcomed them with open arms, fueling more anger. Multiple summits between the occupying nations to resolve the situation failed. By August 1961, more than 1,000 East Germans were fleeing oppression each day.

Soviets Build an 'Anti-Fascist' Wall

Under the guise of keeping Western influence out of East Germany, the communist German

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Democratic Republic (GDR) began erecting a fence on Aug. 13, 1961. This antifascistischer schutzwand, (“anti-fascist protective wall”) as it was known in the GDR, quickly went from a hasty obstacle of concrete wall lined with razor-sharp barbed wire, to a 12-foot-high, 4-foot-wide structure spanning the entire city.

Soon, the razor wire created a barrier throughout Europe, separating the free, democratic West from the communist, Iron Curtain-draped East. The barrier worked to limit the number of people escaping communist oppression in eastern Europe. Many on both sides thought it would be temporary. Instead, it stood for nearly 40 years.

Although it worked to reduce the number of people trying to escape, it did not discourage them completely. As a result, the USSR ordered escapees to be shot on sight. A total of 171 people were reportedly killed trying to get over the wall.

However, freedom seekers continued to escape, employing more creative methods including building tunnels, crawling through sewers and launching hot-air balloons.

For nearly three decades this bitter reality persisted, and tensions remained high between the two sides.

However, in 1989, there was a turning point when citizens of Poland, Hungary, and several other Warsaw Pact nations challenged their communist leadership. In the past, the USSR would come with an iron fist and brutally put down uprisings as they had done during the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and during the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia in 1968.

But this time the Soviet Union backed down. Funding for wall maintenance and other communist programs also began to disappear. The combination emboldened the oppressed citizens. They wanted the wall down.

‘Waiting for the Soviets to Come Through’

Retired Army Command Sgt. Maj. Del Hoskins, a service officer at VFW Post 5712 in Scottsville, Ky., was guarding the Fulda Gap during this time. The Fulda Gap was a strategic location for both NATO forces and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. It provided a navigable lowland route between the East German border and Frankfurt, Germany, in the west. A suitable path for tanks, it was expected to play a key role in any future European conflict.

“Our mission was to delay the Soviets from advancing until everyone else could get there,” Hoskins said about his time stationed at Wildflecken, about 15 miles southeast of Fulda in central Germany. “We were working crazy hours, 16- to 18-hour days, preparing for war.”

Hoskins, who served with the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment in 1989, recalled that he and his fellow cavalymen saw “a trickle” of East Germans coming across the border.

“Warsaw Pact countries weren’t encouraging them, but weren’t stopping them either,” Hoskins said. “Our command said to open the gates and that they would be let through and should not be challenged, but we were all waiting for the Soviets to come through.”

Suspected Spies Now Refugees

That was the beginning of the end of the Cold War, as the “trickle” turned into a flood of refugees from east to west throughout Europe. On Nov. 9, 1989, the East German government formally announced open borders and the flood continued, now from both sides as people from all over Europe celebrated the fall of the Berlin Wall.

“It took a while for our mindsets to change from preparing for war to our new mission,” Hoskins said. “Just a few months earlier, I had a drunk Soviet in my yard. We were trained to detain them, get the military police, because they were all treated like spies. The MPs would question them and get a debrief from us. Now, all of a sudden they were being treated like refugees.”

Hoskins, who displays a piece of the razor wire from the Fulda Gap in his home, explained that once he and his fellow soldiers realized the Soviet threat wasn’t coming, their mission changed to helping refugees.

“With the wall down, our barracks became refugee housing, and we began turning our facilities over to the Germans,” he said. “Just as quickly, we began to prepare to leave Europe.”

Official reunification came to West and East Germany nearly a year later on Oct. 3, 1990, although it would take years before all Soviet remnants were removed. The domino effect followed with the collapse and dissolution of the USSR in December 1991. Graffiti on the Berlin Wall summed up the feeling perfectly for Germans – “Only today is the war finally over.”

This article is featured in the November/December 2019 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by Jim Servi. Jim Servi is a member of VFW Post 10203 in Hamburg, Wis. A veteran of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, Servi is a frequent contributor to VFW magazine.