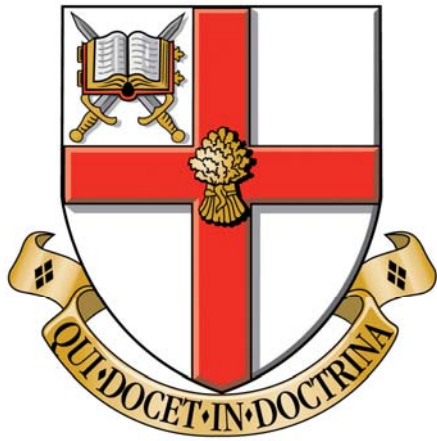


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## The fall of the Berlin Wall

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On 9 November 2014 Germany pauses to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Numerous commemorative events are to take place across Germany, with Berlin the focal point. In the German capital, Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel will open a new permanent exhibition at the Berlin Wall Memorial Site in Bernauer Strasse. Eight thousand illuminated white balloons, installed along the 15 kilometre route where the Wall divided the city, will create a spectacular frontier of light. This light installation represents, according to the organisers, the 'hope for a world without walls'. The commemorative events will climax with the balloons' release, symbolising the opening of the border.

As television and social media carry images of these commemorations around the world, they will stir the memories of perhaps none more so than former citizens of East Germany. For them the Wall had been a fact of life since 13 August 1961, when police erected barbed wire fences on the border with West Berlin. These were the beginnings of what the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED) called the 'Anti-Fascist Protective Wall'. The Party claimed that the Wall was designed to keep East Germans safe from the 'fascists' in the western half of the city. On the same day, the inner German border stretching from the Baltic Sea to Czechoslovakia was sealed. Some East Germans might have questioned the Wall's existence in private, but the majority nevertheless accepted that there was nothing that they could do about it. After all, in January 1989 the head of the SED, Erich Honecker, had claimed that the Wall would stand for another 50 or 100 years. Citizens joked that all that was needed was a glass dome on top of their country to complete their isolation.

To find out more about how East German citizens experienced the existence and demise of the Berlin Wall, I carried out oral history interviews with 40 of them in the eastern German city of Magdeburg. For those interviewees who were adults on 13 August 1961, the sealing of the borders to the West came as a massive shock. However, the extent to which the existence of the Wall affected individuals' lives varied to a great extent. Some complained that they were no longer able to spend their leisure time watching the latest Hollywood releases in West Berlin cinemas. For others, the Wall did not just divide countries; it divided families, too: one woman found herself cut off from her twin sister in the West. Other interviewees, though not supporters of the SED, recalled the Wall with surprising stoicism. On numerous occasions they recounted that, although a terrible thing, the construction of the Wall was a measure borne out of economic necessity. Between 1949, the year East Germany was founded, and 1961 approximately 2.7 million people left the country to escape the oppression. Many of those who fled were vital to the East German economy, such as engineers and farmers, and could not easily be replaced.

Those interviewees too young to remember life before the Wall did not easily come to terms with its existence. One woman felt that it was a disgrace that she learned

French at school and used maps of Paris to do so, a city that she was convinced she would never see because of the Wall. Another recalled that he encountered the Wall at least once a year when visiting friends in East Berlin. He remembered that the tram he took travelled directly along the route of the Wall. He would gaze out of the window at the imposing grey barrier, slicing streets and lives in two, and would think, 'this is so miserable. What have we actually done here?'

In 1989 citizens' dissatisfaction with the SED came to a head. With the state nearing bankruptcy and living conditions steadily worsening, the SED's refusal to change course angered many. As other Eastern Bloc countries cautiously welcomed Mikhail Gorbachev's *Perestroika* and *Glasnost* initiatives, the SED firmly rejected them. In 1987 leading Politburo member Kurt Hager had dismissed the changes occurring in the Soviet Union with jarring flippancy: 'If your neighbour put up new wallpaper in his home, would you feel obliged to put up new wallpaper in your own?' Significant demonstrations for change and 'societal renewal' began to take place across East Germany from September 1989 onwards. The turning point came in Leipzig on 9 October 1989, when up to 100,000 marched peacefully. Despite threats, the regime and its security forces did not intervene, handing the momentum to the demonstrators and paving the way for the fall of the Wall in November.

Many of those interviewees in their 50s and 60s in 1989 stated that their experiences or repression, namely of the protests of 17 June 1953 in East Germany, deterred them from taking part in 1989. On that day an uprising of almost one million people took place across East Germany in an effort to overthrow the regime. Soviet troops brutally put an end to the uprising, resulting in the deaths of almost 100 people. One man, who had nearly been crushed by a tank on 17 June 1953, was in Leipzig on 9 October 1989, but remembered cowering in his hotel room for the entire evening, frozen with fear. The majority of interviewees who attended demonstrations in 1989 were in their 20s and 30s at the time. Though some admitted to being afraid, they recalled that their frustration with their lives and opportunities drove them to protest. As one woman recalled: 'what tipped the balance was the feeling of being caged. I just thought: right, now, enough is enough'.

As eight thousand illuminated white balloons are released into the sky on 9 November 2014, it may seem inconceivable to many that a wall once divided countries, families and, ultimately, the world. Yet, for 28 years it was inconceivable that the Berlin Wall would ever fall.