REMEMBERING THE FALL OF THE WALL

Mid-November marked the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. The East German government built the wall in 1961 to divide the city, despite opposition from the “free world.”

Berlin is Germany’s largest city with a population of 3.5 million. Located at the junction of the Spree and Havel rivers, the city was the German capital between 1871 and 1945, when World War II ended.

From 1949 to 1990, the city was divided into East Berlin and West Berlin. East Berlin was the capital of the German Democratic Republic, or East Germany. The Federal Republic of Germany, or West Germany, however, moved its capital to Bonn.

In 1933 Adolph Hitler’s Third Reich rose to power and he was appointed führer (leader). He abolished free speech, canceled reparation payments that began following World War I and began the persecution and murder of millions of Jews and others. He annexed part of Czechoslovakia, signed a non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union and declared war on Poland in 1939. World War II soon followed.

Near the end of the war, Hitler committed suicide. The Allied armies prevailed, but at great cost. Many German cities were bombed and burned, including Berlin.

Germany’s area of 187,826 square miles (486,469 sq. km) was divided into four occupation zones, each administered by one of the Allies—the United States, the United Kingdom, France and the Soviet Union.

U.S., U.K. and French forces administered the western two-thirds of Germany, while the Soviets administered the eastern one-third. Berlin, located inside Soviet-controlled East Germany, also was divided into sectors, with the Soviets controlling East Berlin and the western powers controlling West Berlin.

The Soviets tried to assert authority over all of Berlin in 1948 by blockading the flow of goods by land from West Germany into West Berlin. The western Allies, however, began a successful 17-month airlift of food and coal to West Berlin in a humanitarian action that stands unprecedented today.

Although the Soviet blockade was broken in 1949, the East Germans built a fortified wall in 1961 dividing the city of Berlin. The East German government designed the wall to keep East Germans from fleeing a deteriorating economy and an abusive political system. The 1948 blockade experience and Berlin’s associated security problems led the West Germans to establish their functional capital at Bonn.

In 1963, just 22 months after the wall was constructed, U.S. President John Kennedy in a famous speech to a West Berlin audience at the Brandenburg Gate expressed opposition to the wall, saying, “Ich bin ein Berliner” (“I am a Berliner”). In 1987, in front of a crowd of 20,000 West Berliners, U.S. President Ronald Reagan uttered the now historic words, “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall.” It was a plea to Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev for a peaceful end to the Cold War.

When, in mid-November 1989, the East German government was unable to stem a growing opposition movement that spread across the entire Soviet Eastern Bloc, it opened the Berlin wall to travel. For the next few weeks both East and West Germans chipped away at the wall in celebration and Germany was reunited. Furthermore, the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe began to fall one by one.

In 1991, the new Germany decreed Berlin its capital once more and scheduled a gradual shift of governmental affairs from Bonn to Berlin by year 2000.

The 20 years since the fall of the wall have brought incredible changes in Berlin’s communication and transportation infrastructures, including the newest fiber optic connections and telecommunications services, high-speed subway and railway facilities and modern highways. Today, Berlin is an important center of science, politics, media and culture in Europe and is one of the most visited tourist destinations on the continent.

The 20th anniversary celebrations that occurred in Berlin were grand, with visits from dignitaries like Gorbachev and U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. While there is hardly a remnant of the structure remaining on the landscape today, the infamous Berlin wall long will be remembered.

And that is Geography in the News™, December 4, 2009. #1018.

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