Berliner Beauftragter
zur Aufarbeitung
der SED-Diktatur

BERLIN

Berliner Landeszentrale
für politische Bildung

BERLIN: THE HISTORY OF A DIVID ED CITY

Questions & Answers

1 When and why was Berlin divided?

2 What was Berlin's Four Powers status?

3 What happened on 17 June 1953?

4 When was the Berlin Wall built and where was it located?

5 How did the Wall impact the lives of people in the East and West of the city?

6 How could people in the East and the West stay in touch?

7 What were the so-called 'ghost stations' (Geisterbahnhöfe)?

8 Why were identity cards in West Berlin green?

9 Why was West Berlin referred to as an 'island'?

10 What were the economic and social consequences of West Berlin's 'island' status?

11 Why did people move to West Berlin? And why did others leave?

12 Why are there two zoos and two state libraries in Berlin?

13 Who was allowed to move to East Berlin?

14 Living in East Berlin: An apartment in a prefab housing estate, or in a period house?

15 What was life like for 'contract workers' in East Berlin?

16 What led to the demonstrations in the GDR in autumn 1989?

17 What were the reasons for the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989?

18 Why were the former Stasi headquarters in East Berlin occupied twice in 1990?

19 When were the first free elections held in East Berlin? And what were the results?

20 Why was there such a rapid rise in unemployment in the eastern parts of the city?

21 What did the end of the GDR imply for women?

22 Why were there so many squatters in the eastern parts of the city after 1989?

23 When did the Allied forces withdraw from Berlin?

24 What did reunification mean for ‘guest workers’ and ‘contract workers’?

25 What does the principle ‘Restitution over Compensation’ (Rückgabe vor Entschädigung) refer to?

26 What traces of the city’s division can still be seen along Berlin’s inner-city district boundaries today?

27 How is Berlin’s reputation as the world’s capital of club culture related to the city’s division?

28 What traces are left of the city’s division today?

29 What differences still exist between East and West Berlin?

30 Where can you explore the history of Berlin’s division today?

1

When and why was Berlin divided?

In Europe, the Second World War, unleashed by Nazi Germany, ended with Germany's unconditional surrender on 8 May 1945. The victorious Allies—the Soviet Union, the United States, the United Kingdom and France—partitioned Germany into four zones of occupation and its capital, Berlin, into four sectors. By 1948, with the beginning of the 'Cold War' and the bloc confrontation between East and West, the three Western Allies merged their occupation zones and sectors. In 1949, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG—West Germany) and the German Democratic Republic (GDR—East Germany) were founded. Berlin was divided into two halves, the status of which would remain disputed up until reunification in 1990.

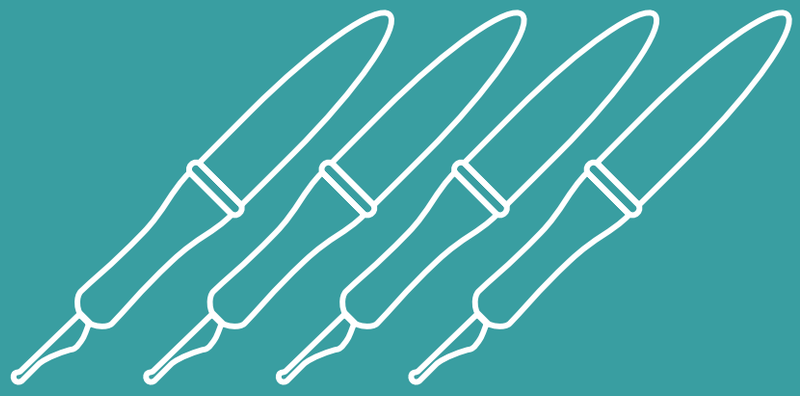




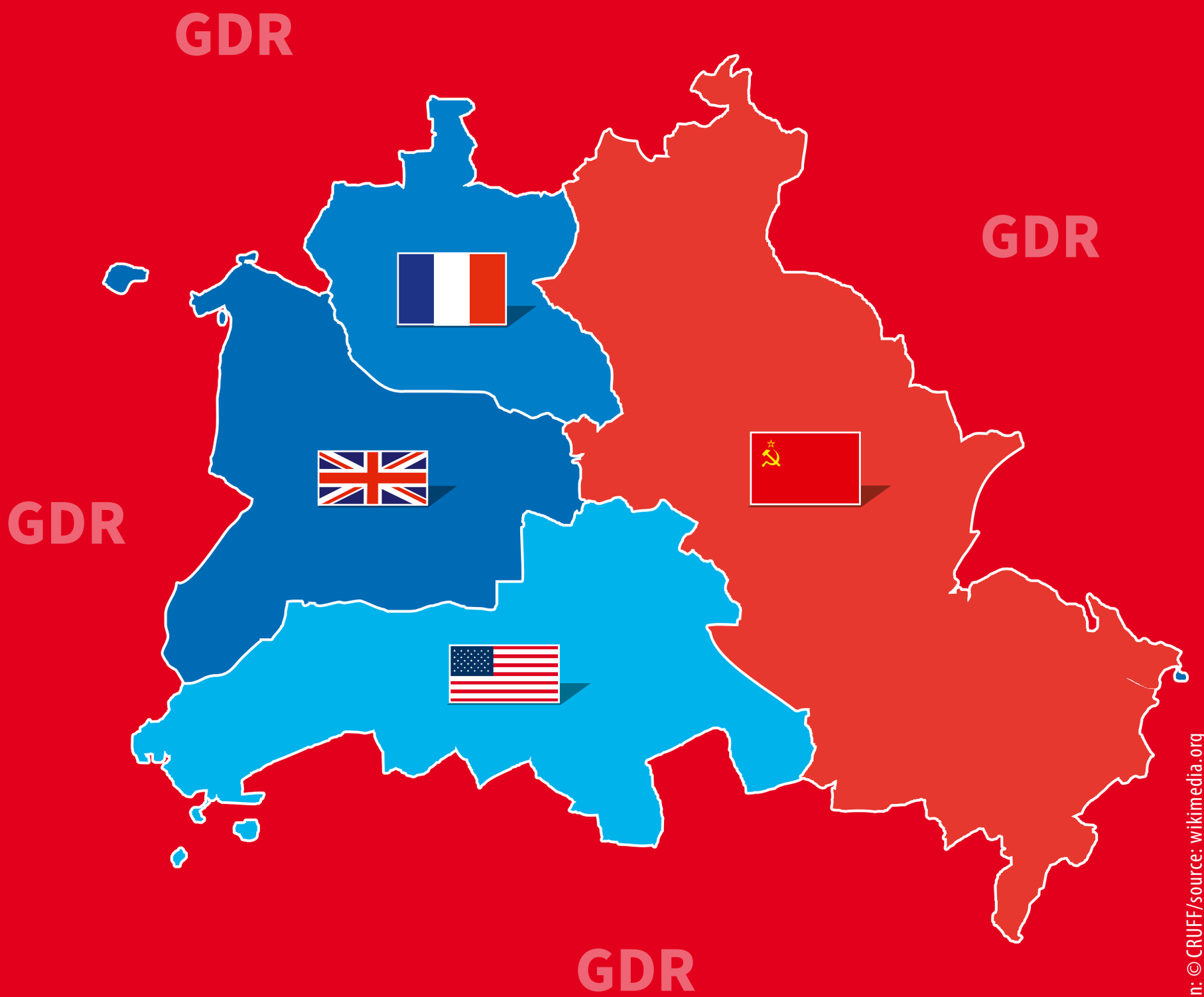
illustration: © CRUFF

2

What was Berlin’s Four Powers status?

Officially, neither West nor East Berlin were part of either East or West Germany. The implications of this included, for instance, that there was no military conscription in West Berlin, or that there were border checkpoints even between East Berlin and East Germany up until 1976. West Berlin was located in the centre of the Soviet zone of occupation (i.e. the GDR). This is why the Soviet Union and East Germany were keen to change the Four Power status of the city and take control of all of Berlin. The Soviet Union launched such an attempt through the blockade of Berlin in 1948/49: for an 11-month period, all important access roads to West Berlin were closed off. In response to this, Allied forces launched the ‘Berlin Airlift’, with US and British aircraft flying in provisions for the population of West Berlin.





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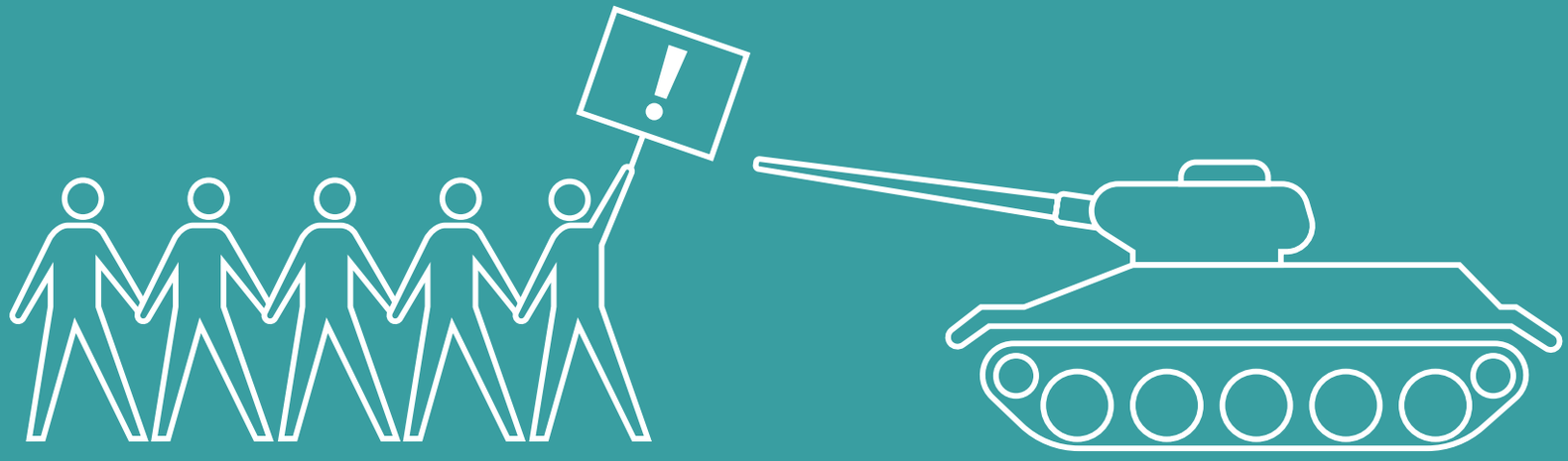
3

What happened on 17 June 1953?

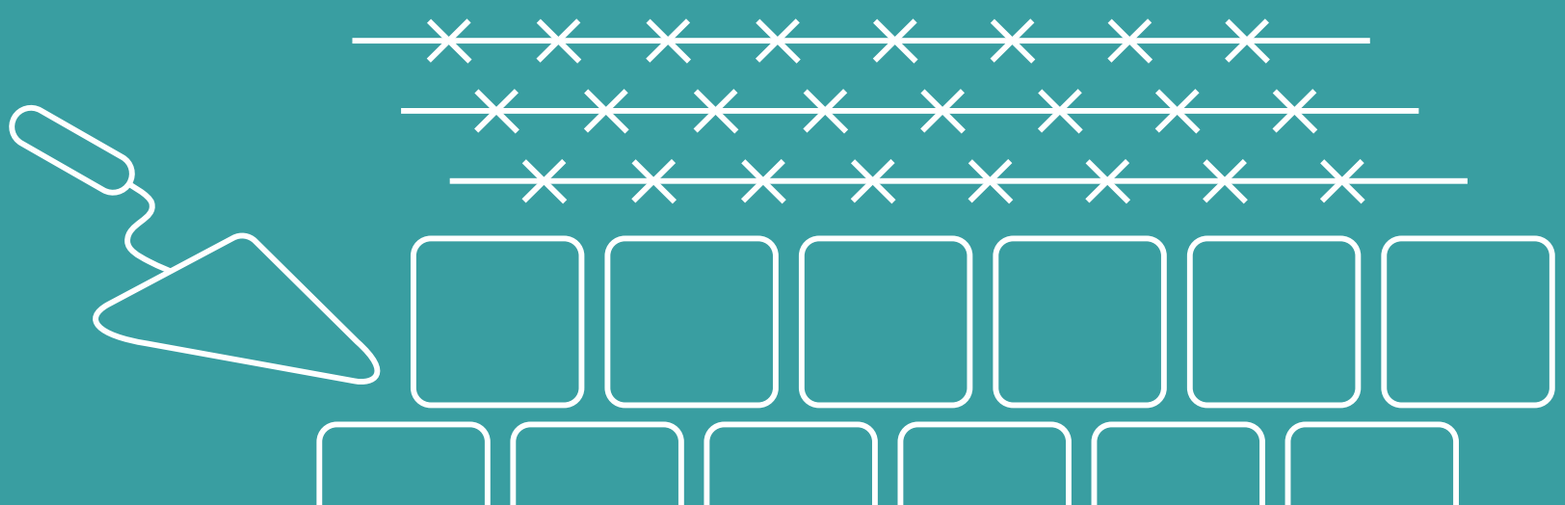
On 17 June 1953, protests and strikes spread across the GDR. In East Berlin, construction workers had taken the lead and walked off work. At first, their protests were directed mainly against the ‘norm increases’, which meant more work for the same pay. Yet the demonstrations soon raised other issues as well. Protesters criticised the dictatorial rule of the Socialist Unity Party (SED) and demanded free elections. The Soviet army moved in and crushed the revolt with bloody repression, killing at least 55 people. From 1954 to 1990, 17 June was a national holiday in West Germany. Named ‘German Unity Day’, it was supposed to commemorate the aim of reuniting the two parts of Germany.



4

When was the Berlin Wall built and where was it located?

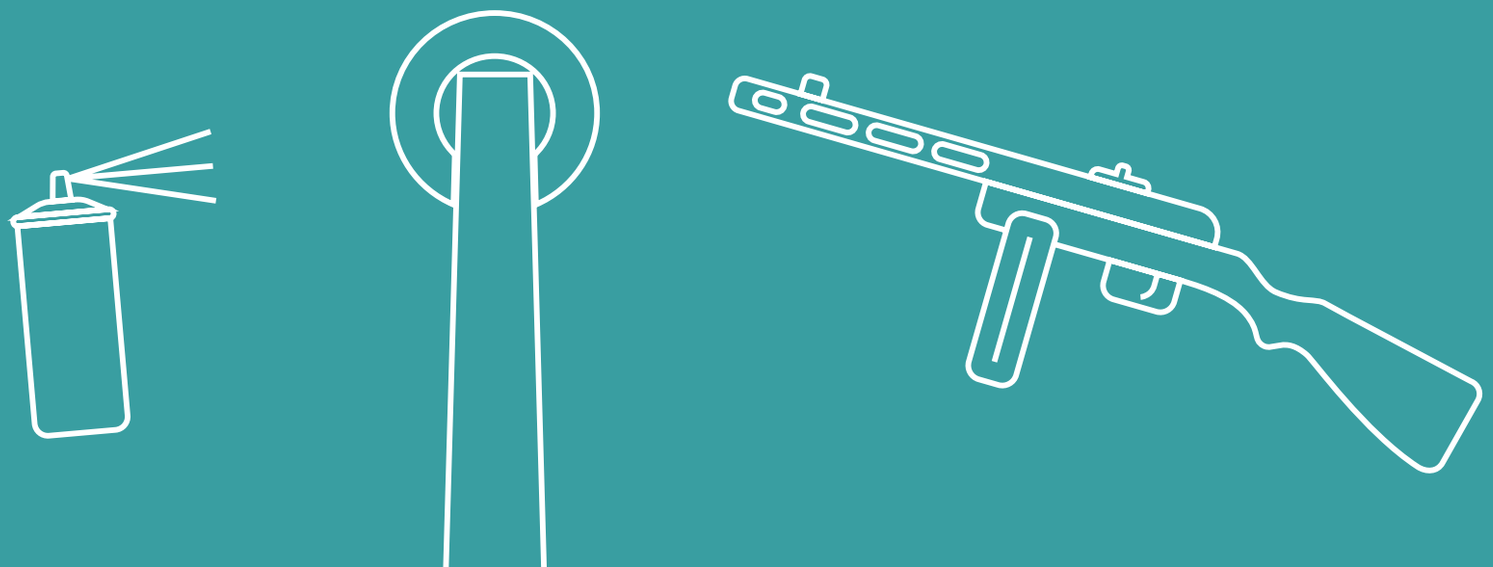
The date 13 August 1961 marks the beginning of the construction of the Berlin Wall. The SED's party leadership was determined to prevent any more people from fleeing to the West. Since the founding of the GDR, around 2.5 million people, particularly young people, had left the country. The border was not demarcated by a wall from the outset, but with barbed wire, which was gradually replaced with concrete blocks. Over the following decades, a border strip was formed in the middle of the city. The Wall surrounded West Berlin. Attempts to illegally cross the heavily guarded border checkpoints were almost impossible. In 1989, there were 14 border crossing points.



5

How did the Wall impact the lives of people in the East and West of the city?

In Berlin, the Wall simply became part of everyday life. West Berlin was literally walled in. In some parts of Kreuzberg, the Wall was sprayed with graffiti and integrated into the alternative urban scene. On the eastern side, no one was allowed to even approach the Wall. Even before the actual border strip began, there was a restricted zone that could only be entered with a permit. At the Berlin Wall alone, at least 140 people lost their lives, most of them shot by GDR border guards while attempting to escape to West Berlin.



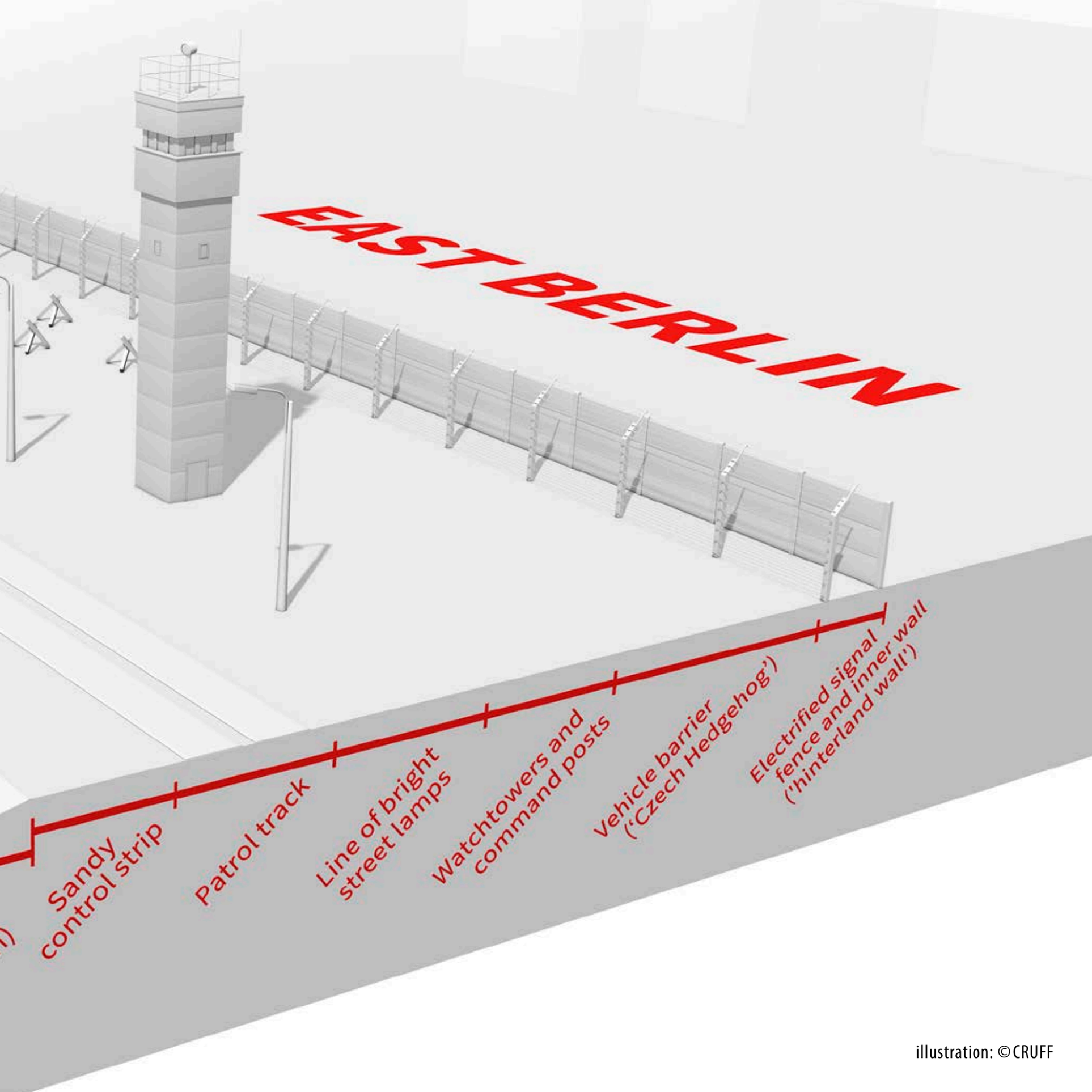
6

How could people in the East and the West stay in touch?

Up until 1961, many Berliners commuted between East and West. Tens of thousands of people lived in one part of the city and worked in the other. The construction of the Wall put a sudden end to this. Thanks to a temporary agreement on travel permits, West Berliners were allowed to visit their relatives in East Berlin at least for Christmas from 1963 onwards. Travel in the other direction was permitted again from 1964—but only for a small part of the population, including pensioners. For the majority of East Germans, the border remained hermetically sealed until the fall of the Wall in 1989.



WEST BERLIN
Border wall
Vehicle barrier (ditch)



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7

What were the so-called ‘ghost stations’ (Geisterbahnhöfe)?

Despite the city’s partition, the train lines continued to run through both halves of Berlin. These connections were severed once the Wall was built. The trains that ran through East Berlin underground now just passed through the stations without stopping. Entrances to these over- and underground train stations in East Berlin were walled up, and border troops now guarded them (e.g. Oranienburger Tor, Rosenthaler Platz, Nordbahnhof). The slow passage through the dimly lit, deserted stations inspired the term ‘ghost station’ (Geisterbahnhof).
On 1 July 1990, the stations were reopened for use.


Osloer Straße
Pankstraße
Seestraße
Leopoldplatz
Humboldthain
Wedding
Reinickendorfer Straße
Bornholmer Straße
Gesundbrunnen
Voltastraße
EAST BERLIN
Bernauer Straße
Stadion der Weltjugend
Nordbahnhof
Nord-bahnhof
Rosenthaler Platz
U8
Oranienburger Tor
Weinmeisterstraße
WEST BERLIN
U6
Oranienburger Straße
Alexanderplatz
Friedrichstraße
Unter den Linden
Jannowitzbrücke
Französische Straße
Stadtmitte
Heinrich-Heine-Straße
Potsdamer Platz
Kochstraße
Anhalter Bahnhof
Moritzplatz
illustration: © CRUFF/source: wikimedia.org

8

Why were identity cards in West Berlin green?

During the first years after the city's partition, both the Federal Republic (West Germany) and the Democratic Republic (East Germany) issued only an 'auxiliary identity card' for the inhabitants of Berlin. From 1953, the GDR issued regular ID cards in East Berlin, not least to promote its integration as the capital of the East German state. In West Berlin, the 'auxiliary identity card' was used up until reunification. It differed from the West German identity card (Personalausweis): the federal eagle, West Germany's heraldic animal, was absent, and no issuing state authority was indicated. All it said was: 'The holder of this identity card is a German national'. In addition, the identity card was green instead of grey.



9

Why was West Berlin referred to as an ‘island’?

West Berlin is located in what was the centre of the GDR’s territory and was entirely encircled by the Wall. Dedicated transit routes through East Germany allowed for road travel between West Germany and West Berlin. This particular situation led to Berlin being described as an ‘island’. Some people were only able to travel by plane, however, as the East German government denied them permission to use the transit roads. Furthermore, it was more difficult for West Berliners than it was for West German citizens to travel to East Berlin. Starting in 1972, West Berliners would have to apply in advance for a visa to visit East Berlin. West Germans, by contrast, were able to obtain such a visa right at the border. To some residents of the ‘island’ of West Berlin it was precisely the city’s special status that made it so appealing.



10

What were the economic and social consequences of West Berlin's 'island' status?

Given the complicated transport and trade routes, the isolation of West Berlin was a challenge for many businesses. The divided city was at the frontline of the Cold War. The fear of possible confrontations between the Soviet Union and the Western Allies made Berlin even less appealing as a business location. Many companies relocated to West Germany. Added to this, the construction of the Wall meant East Berliners could no longer work in the Western part of the city. This expedited the signing of a labour forces recruitment agreement with Turkey, in the wake of which many Turkish workers immigrated to West Berlin from the early 1960s on. The Turkish community has played an important part in shaping life in the city ever since.



11

Why did people move to West Berlin? And why did others leave?

West Berlin had few employment opportunities to offer in business or finance. Instead, the city attracted many artists, members of sexual minorities and political activists. West Berlin's special status, furthermore, meant that conscription law did not apply in the city. As a result, many West German men came to West Berlin to escape compulsory military service. West Berlin also became a magnet for East Germans who had managed to leave the GDR. To others, however, the volatile security situation was reason enough to leave West Berlin. And yet, to some people it was precisely Berlin's unique political role that made it so exciting. Ever since the student protests in 1968, West Berlin was regarded a hotbed of political activism.



12

Why are there two zoos and two state libraries in Berlin?

As a result of the city's division, many cultural institutions exist twice in Berlin. For example, the Tierpark zoo in Friedrichsfelde came to replace the Zoo in West Berlin for the residents of East Berlin from 1955. And in 1978, West Berlin constructed a building complex to house a new State Library ('Staatsbibliothek West') near Potsdamer Platz, as the original building was now in the eastern part of the city. After reunification, some redundant institutions were closed, while some of these twin institutions remained. In 1992, the two state libraries merged into one library with two separate locations.



13

Who was allowed to move to East Berlin?

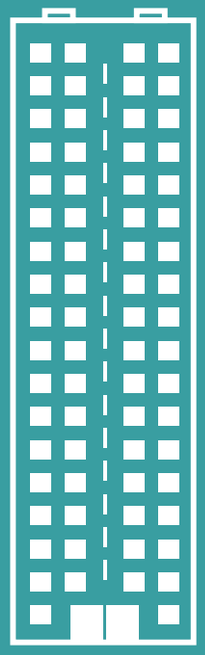
In East Germany, the state controlled the allocation of housing, based on social, but also political criteria. Anyone who wanted to move to East Berlin needed a residence permit. In order to be eligible for such a permit people had to prove that they were employed in the capital and be considered politically reliable. It was one way of preventing people from using their relocation as a launching pad for an escape to West Berlin. Political dissidents and criminals could even be banned from entering Berlin altogether, with such bans sometimes lasting for several years.



14

Living in East Berlin: An apartment in a prefab housing estate, or in a period house?

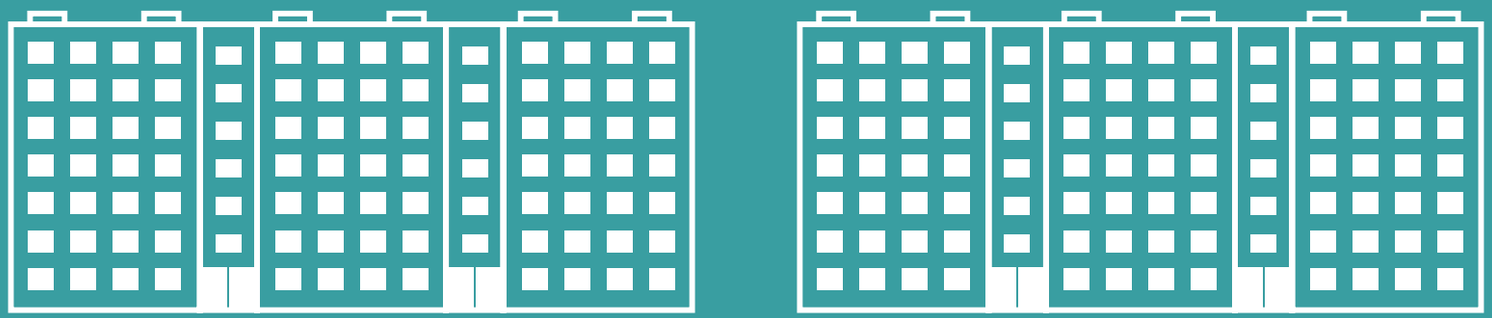
By 1945 around one-third of all residential buildings in East Berlin had been razed to the ground. The first years after World War II saw the construction of imposing housing complexes, such as those that can be found along the Stalin-Allee boulevard (renamed Karl-Marx-Allee in 1961). Yet the housing shortage persisted. In order to build more quickly and efficiently, prefabricated buildings became the standard form of residential housing in East Germany (the so-called Plattenbau, literally meaning ‘panel building’). In East Berlin, many entirely new residential quarters were built. These modern apartments with central heating and bathrooms were highly sought after. Many of the old, pre-war residential buildings increasingly decayed. People with little prospect of being allocated an apartment began moving into and squatting in these dilapidated period properties. This was usually tolerated, as long as rent was paid.



15

What was life like for ‘contract workers’ in East Berlin?

In order to combat its labour shortage, the East German government recruited tens of thousands of so-called ‘contract workers’ (Vertragsarbeiter*innen) from allied nations, with the majority coming from Vietnam, Mozambique, Cuba and Angola. Their employers would usually organise accommodation for these ‘contract workers’, which was often in segregated residential blocks. While their contact with the local population was very limited, racist discrimination was nevertheless a common experience for many of them. The largest of these specially reserved housing complexes, comprising ten concrete high-rise blocks, was at Gehrenseestrasse in the district of Hohenschönhausen. At times, up to 6,000 people lived in the more than 1,000 apartments.



16

What led to the demonstrations in the GDR in autumn 1989?

Over the course of the 1980s, the supply crisis in East Germany worsened. At the same time, political reforms were underway, particularly in the Soviet Union. The leadership of the state party, the SED, refused to consider any changes in the GDR, however. Some people began to organise peace, environmentalist or human rights groups. Others discovered the protestant church as a place for sharing their experiences with others. The mass exodus from East Germany that began in the summer of 1989 further aggravated the political crisis. In the autumn of 1989, a growing protest movement formed, demanding democracy and political freedoms. At that point, hardly anyone was even thinking about German reunification.



17

What were the reasons for the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989?

The summer of 1989 saw the beginning of an illegal mass exodus from the GDR. The reforms in the Soviet Union inspired political changes in other Socialist countries, too. Many people took advantage of this situation and escaped to the West via Hungary. The right to travel freely was in fact among the demands of the protesters in the autumn of 1989. The GDR government was eventually forced to introduce new travel regulations. At a press conference on 9 November, government spokesman Günter Schabowski announced that private travel to the West would be possible. Upon being asked when this new regulation would take effect, he—as it turned out, mistakenly—replied: 'immediately, without delay'. That same evening, people gathered at the border crossing points and demanded that the border be opened. The entirely unprepared East German border guards ultimately bowed to the pressure of the crowds. The border between East and West Berlin was first opened at the Bornholmer Strasse border checkpoint at 11:39 pm.



18

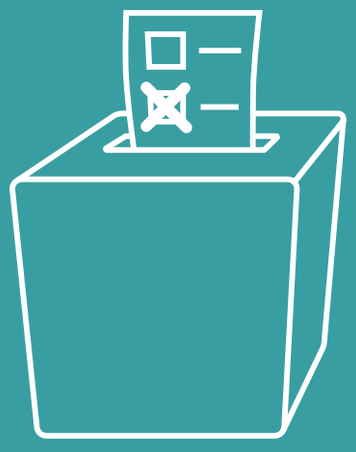
Why were the former Stasi headquarters in East Berlin occupied twice in 1990?

The Ministry for State Security (Ministerium für Staatssicherheit, MfS), commonly referred to as the Stasi, was at once secret police, domestic intelligence service and foreign secret service. Beginning in December 1989, civil rights groups occupied Stasi offices all over the country, demanding the disbanding of the Stasi and the protection of the files from being destroyed. On 15 January 1990, the Stasi headquarters at Normannenstrasse in Berlin was occupied by protesters. By late March 1990, the Stasi had effectively been disbanded. This was followed, in September 1990, by another occupation of the former headquarters by civil rights groups. One of their demands was that all victims should have access to the Stasi files and that those files remain in East Germany. Eventually both the West and East German governments agreed to preserve and store the Stasi files in East Germany. An amendment to the Unification Treaty paved the way, for the first time in history, for the entire archive of a secret police, or secret service, to be opened for victims, researchers and journalists.

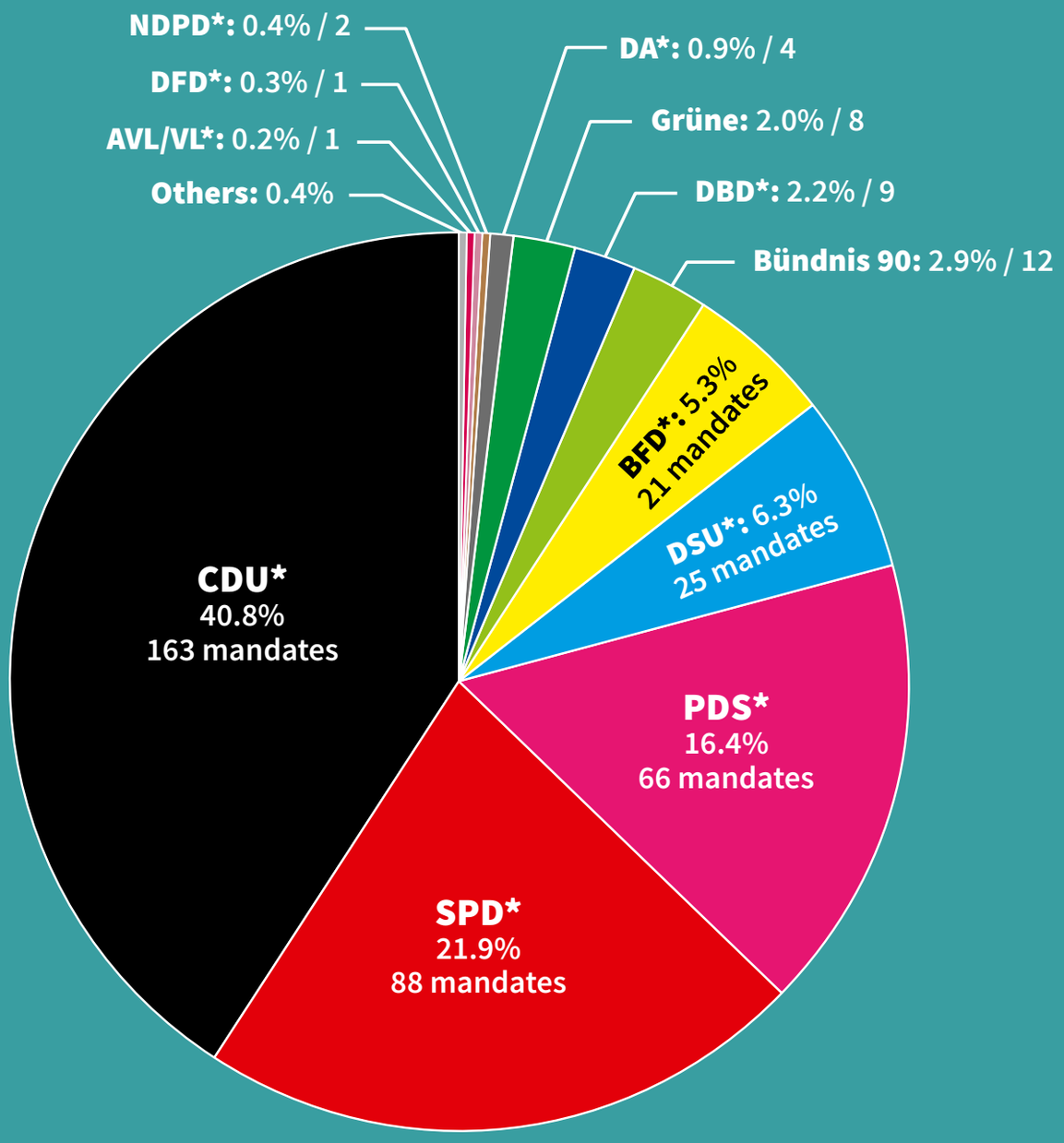
19

When were the first free elections held in East Berlin? And what were the results?

On 18 March 1990, the first free elections to the GDR's parliament (Volkskammer) were held. The Social Democratic Party (SPD) was expected to come out on top, followed by the PDS, the successor party of the former state party, the SED. But, quite surprisingly, the winner of the election on 18 March was the so-called 'Germany Alliance', an electoral coalition led by the eastern branches of the Christian Democrats (CDU). The 'Alliance' advocated swift reunification and the immediate introduction of the Deutschmark in the East. Election results in East Berlin painted a rather different picture: here, the SPD and PDS received most votes. The local elections of 6 May led to a similar outcome: while the SPD and PDS were able to win in East Berlin, the 'Germany Alliance' received most of the votes in the rest of the GDR.

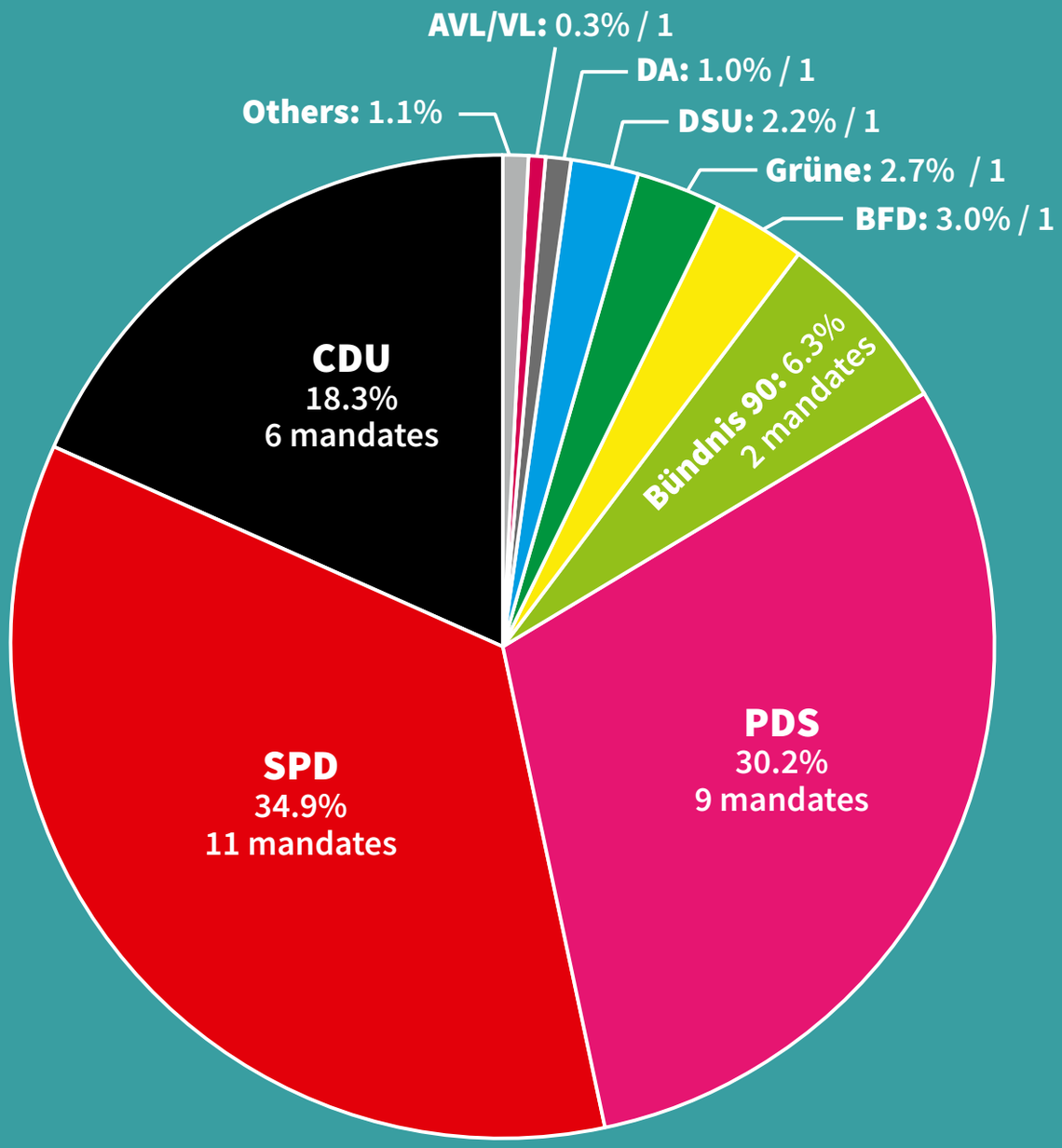


Results of the 1990 elections to the Volkskammer



East Germany

* BFD = Bund Freier Demokraten (Free Democrats; liberal); Bündnis 90 (Alliance of 3 non-communist groups; ecologically-oriented); CDU = Christlich Demokratische Union (Christian Democratic Party; centre-right); DBD = Demokratische Bauernpartei Deutschlands (German Democratic Farmers' Party); DSU = Deutsche Soziale Union (German Social Union; conservative); Grüne (The Green Party); PDS = Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus (Party of Democratic Socialism; socialist); SPD = Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (German Social Democratic Party; centre-left)



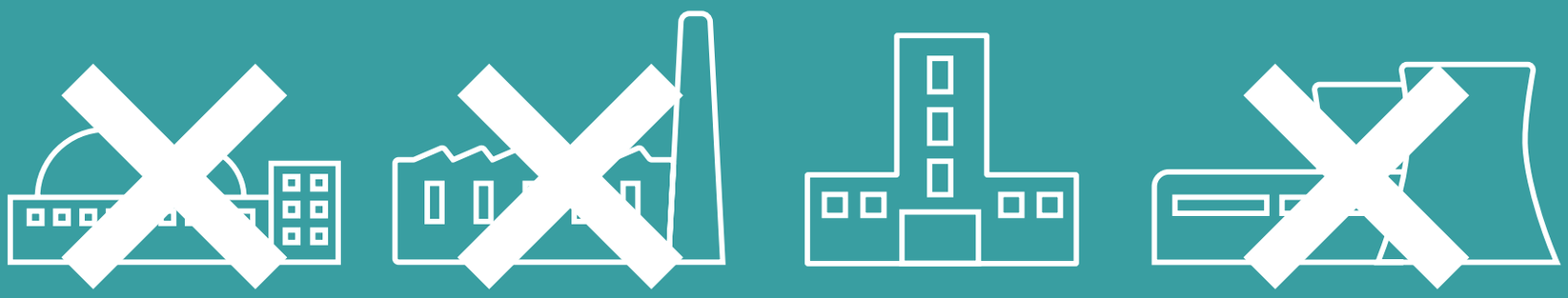
East Berlin

illustrations (l. u. r.) ©CRUFF/source: wahlrecht.de/Wikipedia

20

Why was there such a rapid rise in unemployment in the eastern parts of the city?

Many enterprises in the GDR did not survive the transformation following 1990. The so-called ‘Trust Agency’ (Treuhandanstalt) was tasked with organising the transition from a planned economy to a market economy. Many of the ailing businesses were ultimately closed down, with severe economic and social consequences. This was particularly obvious in Berlin’s district of Oberschöneweide, which had been the largest industrial site in East Berlin, employing up to 30,000 people at the height of operations. By 1993, the share of unemployment benefit recipients had risen to 80% of the district’s population. The last major plant closed down in 2005. Many industrial buildings have now been renovated, some still remain vacant, while others are used as arts and culture venues.



21

What did the end of the GDR imply for women?

Women were particularly affected by unemployment in the wake of 1989. Single mothers were hit even harder, as comprehensive childcare, which had been a given in the East, no longer existed in this form, thus threatening the economic independence of many women. Reunification also entailed many new laws—for example, concerning abortion. Since 1972, abortion had been legal in the GDR during the first three months of pregnancy and without having to give any reasons. In West Germany, however, Article 218 of the German Criminal Code was (and still is) the legal norm, which exempts abortion from prosecution but still makes it illegal.



22

Why were there so many squatters in the eastern parts of the city after 1989?

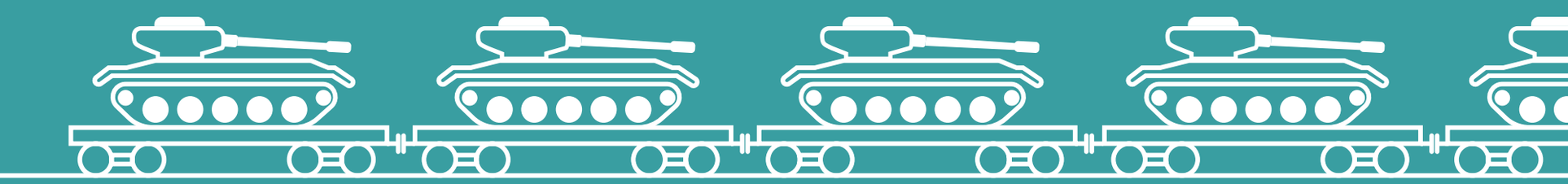
Even before 1989, many of the period residential buildings in East Berlin were vacant. Most people had chosen to move into more appealing modern apartment buildings, others had fled to the West. The number of vacant buildings increased after the opening of the border. Added to this was a legal situation in the recently reunified city of Berlin that was rather chaotic. Entire streets were occupied by squatters, who were for the most part left-wing activists and groups. That said, there were also neo-Nazi squatter groups, which sometimes led to violent confrontations. In 1992, the left-wing squatter Silvio Meier was murdered by neo-Nazis in Friedrichshain. Today, the street where the murder took place is named after him.



23

When did the Allied forces withdraw from Berlin?

In September 1990, the two German states and the four Allies of World War II signed the Treaty on the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany, or as it is commonly referred to in Germany, the Two Plus Four Agreement. The treaty stipulated the conditions for German reunification on 3 October 1990. It also set out the withdrawal of Soviet troops from the territory of the GDR. By the end of 1994, more than 300,000 soldiers were to return to the Soviet Union. Following this withdrawal, the 12,000 troops of the Western Allies would also leave Berlin. On 31 August 1994, the Russian troops (no longer referred to as Soviet by then) officially bid the city farewell at the Soviet War Memorial at Treptower Park; eight days later, the Western Allies did so at the Berlin Airlift Memorial at Tempelhof Airport.



24

What did reunification mean for ‘guest workers’ and ‘contract workers’?

In 1989, around 90,000 ‘contract workers’ lived in the GDR. Most of them lost their jobs after 1989, often being among the first to be dismissed. Many ‘contract workers’ were subsequently forced to leave the country, and their numbers had dropped to 15,000 by 1997. Unemployment particularly affected the ‘guest workers’ in West Berlin. Racist attacks (on both individuals and residential buildings) were becoming increasingly frequent. During the early 1990s, far-right extremists were attacking people of color in many cities in both East and West.



25

What does the principle ‘Restitution over Compensation’ (Rückgabe vor Entschädigung) refer to?

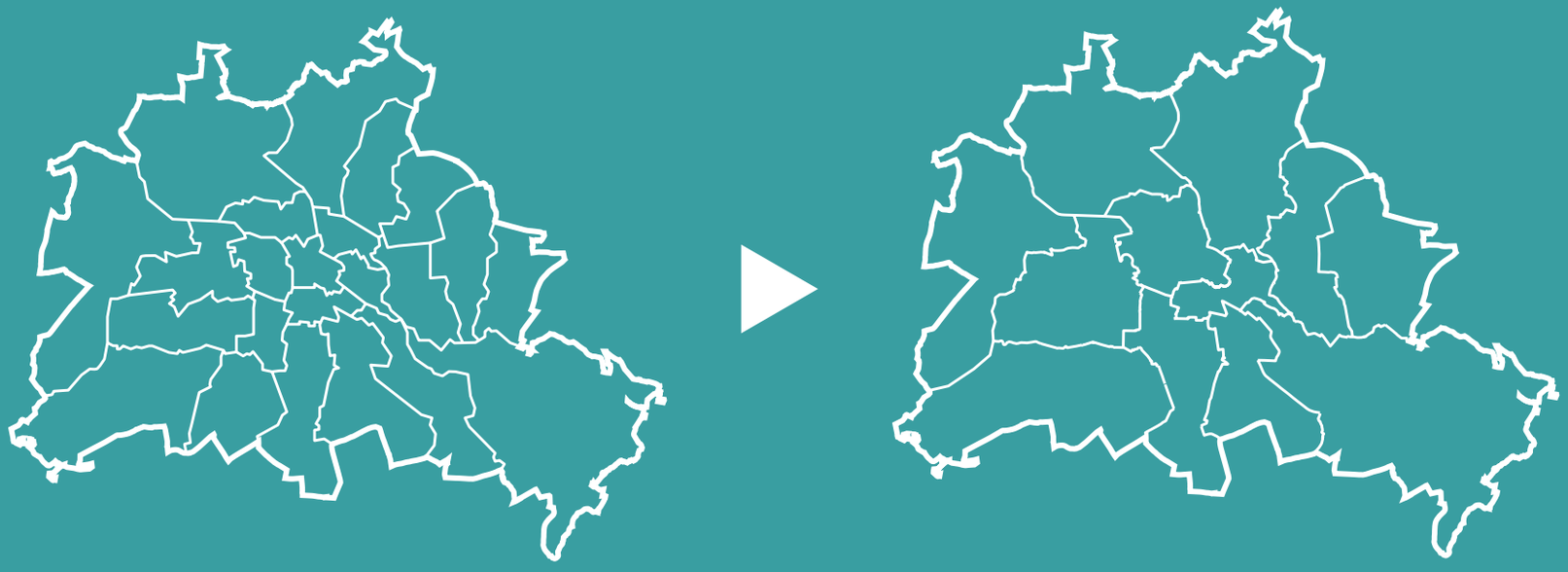
Over the 40 years of its existence, the East German state confiscated and expropriated the assets of many people who had fled to the West. After reunification, these assets were to be returned to their former owners. Compensation was only paid where restitution was not possible. Many people in East Berlin were concerned that they could be displaced from their houses and apartments if their landlords changed. There were protests and legal battles, some of which lasted for decades.



26

What traces of the city's division can still be seen along Berlin's inner-city district boundaries today?

As of 1 January 2001, the city of Berlin restructured its districts, reducing their number from 23 to 12. Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg and Mitte are the only two districts once separated by the Wall that were merged into one. Although other new districts, such as Treptow-Köpenick, were also created in the process, here the two districts were not a mix of former East and West Berlin districts.



27

How is Berlin's reputation as the world's capital of club culture related to the city's division?

Decommissioned and abandoned administrative buildings and factories, or just wasteland along the former border strip, provided a perfect stage for the growing party scene during the 1990s. In addition, Berlin's low living costs attracted countless artists from around the world. Projects like the Art House Tacheles (Kunsthaus Tacheles) occupied abandoned places and turned them into tourist attractions. Many of the clubs have since been repeatedly forced to relocate, as most of the empty spaces no longer exist. Because of the sharp rise in rents over the past years, the alternative club and arts scene is increasingly disappearing from the city centre.



28

What traces are left of the city's division today?

West Berlin was encircled by some 160 kilometres of walls and fences. Since 2006, this route can be explored on the Berlin Wall Trail (Mauerweg). Along the route, there are numerous memorial sites and remnants of the old border installations. Traces of division can be found all over the city, even beyond the Wall and border strip itself: even today, tram lines run almost exclusively in the eastern parts of Berlin, as West Berlin had dismantled its tram system by the 1960s. The erstwhile division of Berlin can also be seen on satellite pictures taken at night, owing to the different kind of street lamps that were (and still are) used in East and West.

www.berliner-mauer-gedenkstaette.de

29

What differences still exist between East and West Berlin?

Apart from the obvious traces of the city's division in Berlin's streetscape, there are less visible differences between the two halves of the city. For example, incomes in some western districts are not only markedly higher than in all eastern districts, but also more unevenly distributed. Furthermore, electoral preferences in the various districts still reflect the former division.



30

How and where can you explore the history of Berlin today?

A large number of museums and memorial sites offer a great opportunity for people to learn more about the city's history of division and reunification. For example, at the Berlin Wall Memorial at Bernauer Strasse, there is a 70-metre stretch of the former border strip that can be visited. The Campus for Democracy, located at the former Stasi headquarters, today houses exhibitions and educational programmes and facilities. Museums in the various city districts offer new perspectives on the history of everyday urban life. The following websites provide an overview:



www.museumsportal-berlin.de

https://www.berlin.de/politische-bildung/bildungspraxis/lernorte/ddr-geschichte/

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