**Berlin and the Cold War**

**1945 - 1961**

The city of Berlin is in the eastern portion of Germany about thirty-five miles west of the post-1945, Polish border and located on the Spree River. The early town had become the capital of the Mark of Brandenburg at the end of the fifteenth century and later capital of the kingdom of Prussia. When the German states created the German Empire in 1871, Berlin became the capital of the new Germany. The city remained the capital of Germany until after World War II, when the United States, France, Great Britain and the Soviet Union occupied four separate zones of the city.

As cooperation between the Soviet Union and the West disintegrated after 1945, Germany ended up formally divided into two separate countries. In 1949 the Western powers sponsored the formation of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), or West Germany, while the Soviet Union sponsored the creation of the German Democratic Republic (DDR), or East Germany. The problem with this arrangement was that East Germany contained the city of Berlin, but the western half of the city itself remained under the administration of the Western powers, and thus became a part of West Germany, despite its physical isolation from West Germany (a little more than one hundred miles inside the East-West border.)

In 1948, in an effort to forestall the imminent creation of the FRG, the Soviet Union blockaded ground access to West Berlin in order to speed a resolution of the "Berlin question," i.e., the incorporation of Berlin into East Germany. To avoid a direct confrontation with the Soviet army, the Western allies used an enormous airlift to supply the Western sectors of the city for almost a year. The Soviet gamble had failed, but Berlin remained a thorny issue of East-West relations.

In November 1958, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev issued an ultimatum giving the West six months to agree to withdraw from Berlin and make it a free, demilitarized city or else the Soviet Union would turn access to the city over to East Germany. When the U.S., Great Britain and France rejected Khrushchev's ultimatum, the Soviets withdrew the deadline and instead agreed to meet with the Western powers in a foreign ministers' conference. Although the three-month-long sessions failed to reach any agreement, they did lead to Khrushchev's visit to the United States in September 1959.

In June 1961, Khrushchev renewed the crisis over Berlin during a meeting with the new American president, John Kennedy, in Vienna. Khrushchev again threatened to sign a separate peace treaty with East Germany that would end existing four-power agreements guaranteeing Western access to West Berlin. Kennedy wanted to make sure that Khrushchev understood Western determination to maintain access to the city at any risk.

East Germans, stirred by the crisis, fled to West Berlin in increasing numbers. In July alone there were some 30,000. (All told it has been estimated that between 1949 and 1961, about 2.5 million East Germans had fled from East to West). The stead loss of skilled workers, professionals and intellectuals threatened to destroy the economic viability of the East German state. Suddenly, on the night of 12-13 August 1961, the Soviets began to erect a wall (the Berliner Mauer) between the east and west sectors of Berlin, forcibly sealing off the inhabitants of East Germany.

The original wall of barbed wire and cinder blocks was later replaced by a more formidable series of concrete walls (fifteen feet high) topped with barbed wire and guarded with watchtowers, gun emplacements and mines. By the 1980s this system of walls, electrified fences and fortifications extended almost thirty miles through the city and an additional seventy-five miles around West Berlin.

The Soviet government never did sign a separate peace treaty with East Germany. The Berlin Wall became the symbol of the Cold War and the division of East from West until its destruction in the fall of 1989.