

Fall of the Berlin Wall

Events: On 9 November 1989, a weary East German government spokesman announced that travel restrictions would be lifted. Flustered and subjected to further questioning, he then stated that this would take effect 'immediately'. The effect of the announcement was electric. Inspired by the heady excitement that had been generated by the collapse of communist regimes in Poland and Hungary and by weekly mass demonstrations in Leipzig and, on a smaller scale, in other major East German cities, West and East Berliners rushed to the Wall. A euphoric party atmosphere rapidly developed, with people dancing on top of the Wall and helping each other over in both directions. By the morning of November 10, the dismantling of the Berlin Wall, the chief symbol of the Cold War era, had begun. Over the following days and weeks, the borders between the two Germanies and the two parts of Berlin were increasingly opened up. Just as the fall of the Berlin Wall had been inspired by events elsewhere in Eastern Europe, it, in turn, proved to be a source of inspiration. Communist rule collapsed in Czechoslovakia in December, and in Romania rioting first forced the Communist leader Ceaușescu and his wife Elena to flee by helicopter, before they were captured and summarily executed on Christmas Day.

Significance: The fall of the Berlin Wall was the iconic moment in the momentous year of 1989, which witnessed the Eastern Europe Revolutions that effectively rolled back the boundaries of communism to the borders of the Soviet Union and ignited a process of reform that affected the entire communist world. The year 1989 is widely, and with justification, viewed as one of the most significant dates in world history, ranking alongside 1648 (the birth of the European state-system), 1789 (the French Revolution), 1914 (the outbreak of WWI) and 1945 (the end of WWII and the beginning of the Cold War). The momentum generated in 1989 led directly to a series of world-historical events. First, Germany was reunified in 1990, starting a process through which Europe would be reunified through the subsequent eastward expansion of



the EU (see p. 505) and, to some extent, NATO. Also in 1990, representatives of the Warsaw Pact and NATO, the military faces of East–West confrontation, met in Paris formally to declare an end to hostilities, officially closing the book on the Cold War. Finally, in December 1991, the world's first communist state, the Soviet Union, was officially disbanded.

For Francis Fukuyama, 1989 marked the 'end of history', in that the collapse of Marxism-Leninism as a world-historical force meant that liberal democracy had emerged as the sole viable economic and political system worldwide (for a fuller discussion of the 'end of history' thesis, see p. 539). For Philip Bobbitt (2002), the events precipitated by 1989 marked the end of the 'long war' between liberalism, fascism and communism to define the constitutional form of the nation-state. Nevertheless, some have questioned the historical significance of 1989, as represented by the fall of the Berlin Wall. This has been done in two ways. First, it is possible to argue that there is significant continuity between the pre- and post-1989 periods, in that both are characterized by the hegemonic position enjoyed by the USA. Indeed, 1989 may simply mark a further step in the USA's long rise to hegemony. Second, 1989–91 may have marked only a temporary weakening of Russian power, which, as Russia emerged from the crisis years of the 1990s and started to reassert its influence under Putin, led to the resumption of Cold War-like rivalry with the USA.