

A Sudden Announcement



East German soldiers stand guard on top of the Berlin Wall, built to prevent East Berliners escaping to West Berlin.

ON THE AFTERNOON OF 9 November 1989, a meeting of the East German government was taking place in East Berlin. No one present realized that this meeting would have extraordinary consequences. It would, in fact, lead to a moment that changed world history – the fall of the Berlin Wall.

By 1989, Germany had been a divided country for over forty years. West Germany and East Germany were two separate countries, each with its own government and its own capital city. The borders between the two countries were closed. Berlin, deep inside East Germany, was also a divided city. A concrete barrier, the Berlin Wall, ran through it. Those living on the eastern side of the wall were citizens of East Germany. Those living on the other side of the wall were citizens of West Germany, even though their city lay within East Germany. The wall had been built to prevent East Germans crossing from East to West Berlin.

Now East Germany was facing a crisis. Its government, like most of those in Eastern Europe, had been under the control of the communist Soviet Union for decades. But the Soviet Union was going through a period of reform under its leader Mikhail Gorbachev. In the past few years, Gorbachev had been relaxing the strict laws by which communist governments ruled. East European countries had begun to make similar reforms. One of them, Hungary, now had a more liberal government – which had decided to open its borders to the West. For the first time in many years, people were being allowed to leave Hungary and travel into Western Europe. East Germans had begun leaving their country in large numbers – pouring through Czechoslovakia into Hungary, and then crossing the border into Austria.

At the meeting on 9 November the leader of the East German government, Egon Krenz, tried to deal with the crisis. He announced that a new law would allow citizens to travel or emigrate to the West, but only after they had applied for a passport and a visa. It was

thought that forcing people to make this application would slow down the rate at which they were leaving.

Gunter Schabowski, a high-ranking politician, turned up late for the meeting. His copy of the new law was pushed over the table to him and he was told to make it public. That evening, Schabowski met journalists in East Berlin for a press conference. He was to outline recent changes in the work of the government. Schabowski pulled out his last piece of paper, scanned its contents for the first time and read it aloud. Without realizing it, he made an announcement that prepared the way for the fall of the Berlin Wall – and for the reunification of Germany.

A Moment in Time



At 6 pm on 9 November 1989, in a stuffy East Berlin hall, a press conference is taking place. Gunter Schabowski, the government spokesman, makes a closing statement: 'Today, the decision was taken to make it possible for all citizens to leave the country through the official border crossing-points. All citizens can now be issued with visas for the purpose of travel or visiting relatives in the West. The order is to take effect at once...' Journalists shout: 'When? How soon?' Schabowski scans his note, then replies: 'It just means straight away.' The room empties.

An East German celebrates on 11 September 1989, as he crosses the Hungarian border into Austria and the freedom of the West.

