

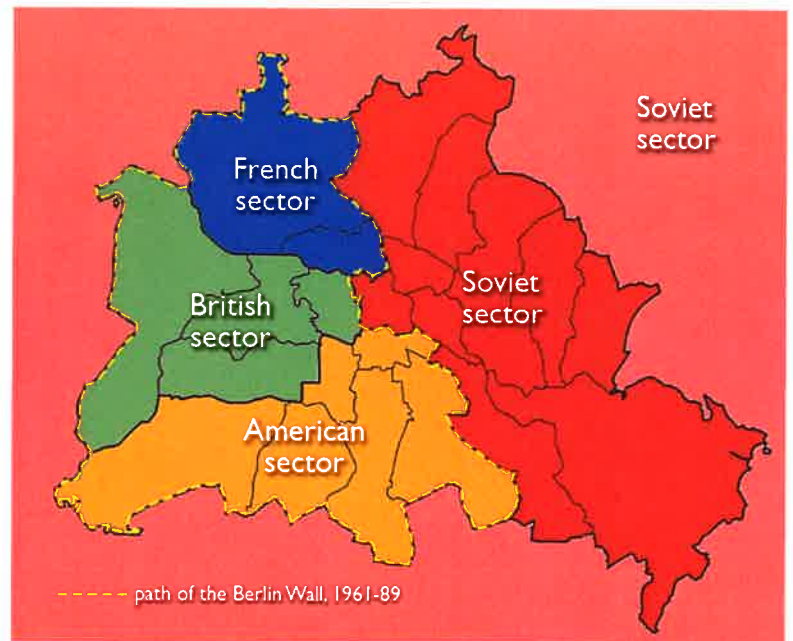
Lesson Plan: The Iron Curtain



This piece of concrete from the museum collection may not look like anything of much importance. In fact, it looks like something you could find laying outside on a broken sidewalk. But it has deeper significance than you might think. It's actually a piece of the Berlin Wall, a symbol of the "Iron Curtain".



Map of post-WWII Germany divided between the Allied Powers (adapted by Dr. Naraelle Hohensee from WikiNight2, GNU Free Documentation License)



Map of the four post-WWII sectors of Berlin and the future path of the Berlin Wall (map adapted by Dr. Naraelle Hohensee from Paasikivi, CC BY-SA 4.0)

At the end of World War II in Europe, Germany was divided between the Allies with the Soviet Union, United States, France, and Great Britain each controlling a portion. Berlin, while situated in the middle of Soviet control was also divided in four sections with the Soviets controlling the east side. Meant to be a temporary split, relations between the western allies and the Soviet Union fell apart and the Cold War, a period of geopolitical tension, began around the 1950's. This meant the split between East and West Berlin became a constant even after the Allies withdrew from Berlin. Both sides had separate administrations but contact between the two continued even during the time after 1952 when the East German government began solidifying borders. Families continued to live on separate sides and people had jobs on the opposite side they lived. However, East Berlin became displeased with the amount of East Germans defecting to the West German side and in 1961 erected a wall that completely cut West Berlin off from East Berlin. The wall, created under the cover of night, split families apart and cut people off from jobs.

The "Iron Curtain" was the phrase used to explain the invisible split between the Soviet Union and the areas it controlled and the non-Soviet controlled areas. The Berlin Wall became a physical symbol of this divide. That said, the wall was not made of iron. The first structure built was made of barbed wire before it was replaced with concrete.

Activity:

Have students split into groups.

In their groups, have them discuss what the day right after the wall went up might have been like for the residents of East and West Berlin. What changed in their daily life? Did it affect jobs? Families? Friends?

Were there things unaffected by the wall?

How was the economy affected by the wall? Have students discuss how tourism and other industries may have been impacted.

63,000 East Berliners lost their jobs in the West and 10,000 West Berliners lost their jobs in the East when the wall went up. Many businesses lost employees with no warning and suddenly a large portion of the population had to find a new job. The tourism industry took a hit, especially in East Berlin. People still visited West Berlin but East Berlin did not encourage tourism and made it hard to travel so very few people took the chance. Even people with family in East Berlin didn't travel over to visit due to the fear of being trapped in East Berlin.

Many people expressed their anger with the wall using art. In West Berlin, the wall was covered in graffiti that expressed the feelings people had. East Berlin was a different story. People couldn't access the wall through the "death strip". The death strip was covered with raked sand or gravel making it easy to spot footprints and it offered no cover which meant a clear view for wall guards to fire on defectors to West Berlin.

Have students pull out a blank sheet of paper and think about how they would feel about a wall splitting their city. Have them draw, write, or create something that expresses their feelings. Request students refrain from inappropriate language or images (if necessary) and remind them that if it was on the wall it would be seen by people of all ages.

Have students research images of art on the wall if they would like to see what type of art was produced. The East Side Gallery is a useful resource as it is the longest preserved piece of the Berlin Wall. After the wall fell, artists redesigned the remaining wall into an open-air gallery. This site can be accessed at <https://www.eastsidegalleryberlin.de/en/>.

The borders were finally reopened in November of 1989. People swarmed the borders and residents of both sides climbed on top of the wall to celebrate. People began picking off pieces of the wall as souvenirs, demolishing the wall, and opening new unsanctioned border crossings. The wall did not begin being officially dismantled until 1990 and roads were reconstructed that had previously been severed by the wall. The reunification of Germany was complete in October of 1990.

Have students discuss why people wanted souvenirs of the wall and why so many museums today have pieces of the wall on display. What can people learn from these pieces of the wall still left today? What feelings does it evoke?