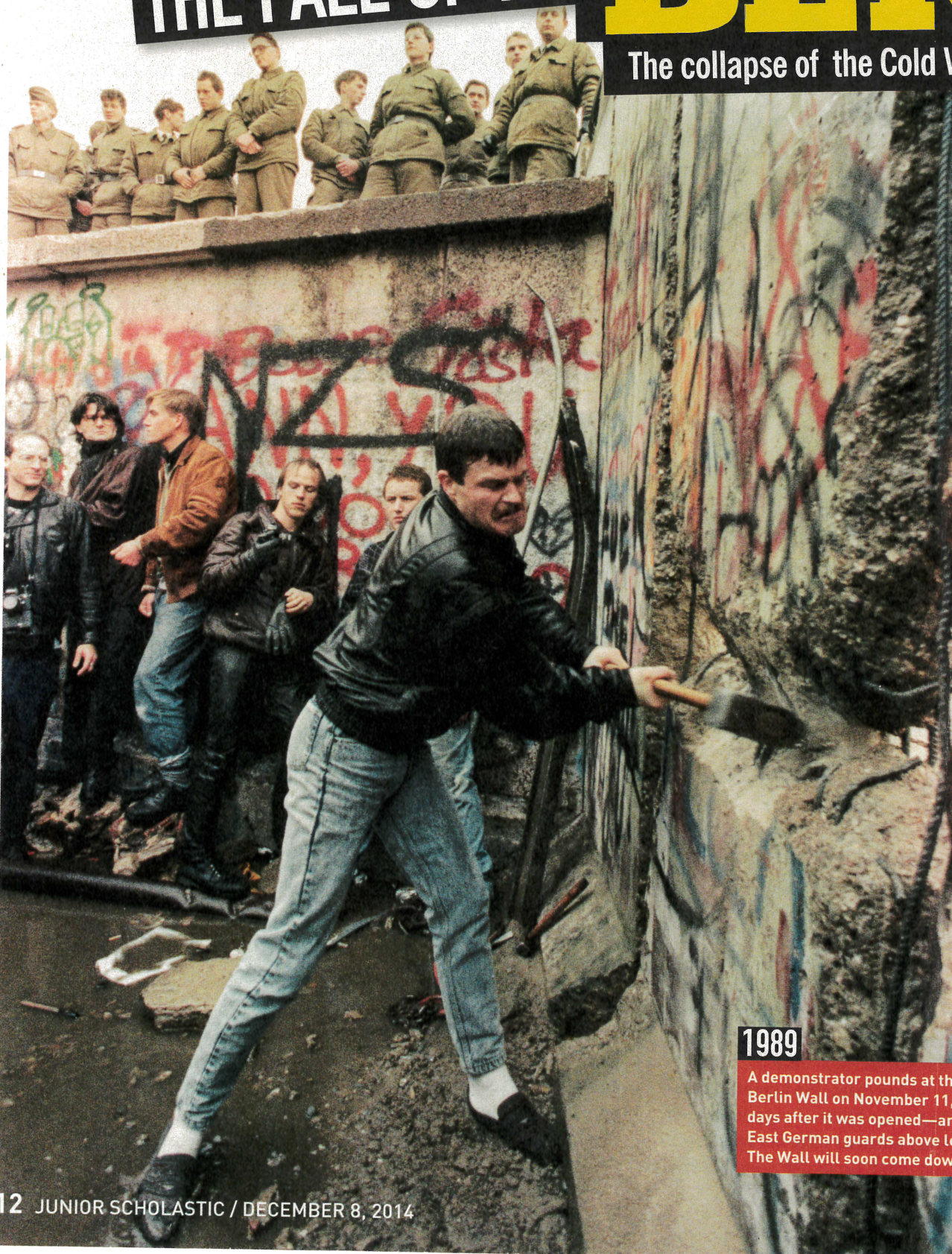


# THE FALL OF THE

# BER

The collapse of the Cold War



**1989**

A demonstrator pounds at the Berlin Wall on November 11, days after it was opened—and East German guards above led. The Wall will soon come down.



# BERLIN WALL

Most famous symbol 25 years ago led to a united Germany and a new Europe

Imagine it were illegal to leave the U.S.—and if you tried to, armed guards along the borders would be waiting to shoot you.

That's what life was like for millions of Eastern Europeans after World War II (1939-45), when the **Soviet Union** controlled their countries. For nearly three decades beginning in 1961, the best-known symbol of Communist repression was the Berlin Wall. The system of concrete barriers, electrified barbed wire, and mined "death strips" ran through the heart of that German city. It ruthlessly cut off the people of East Berlin, capital of Communist East Germany, from West Berlin, in West Germany, and the rest of democratic Europe.

That changed dramatically on the evening of November 9, 1989. Birgit Cristaudo, an East Berlin nurse, remembers it well: "I was watching television," she says, "and suddenly the announcer proclaimed that the Wall was open, repeating it again and again. I sat there stunned, in disbelief."

Cristaudo woke her daughter, Stephanie, 10, and raced down to a bridge to West Berlin that was

usually closed. Amazingly, East Germans were swarming over the bridge and none of the armed guards were stopping them.

"I held Stephanie's hand very tight and we walked to the yellow line across the bridge, one side East Berlin, the other West," she tells *JS*. "I asked my child to close her eyes, step over this line, and try to remember this moment. 'We are living history.'"

## An Iron Curtain

The Berlin Wall was a bitter product of the **Cold War**. During World War II, the U.S., Great Britain, and the Soviet Union joined forces to fight Adolf Hitler's Germany. But as their armies advanced separately on Berlin, Germany's capital, to defeat Hitler, the Soviets seized control of a third of Germany and most of Eastern Europe. After the war, the Soviets broke promises to hold free elections there, and instead installed puppet Communist governments.

In March 1946, former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill warned that "an iron curtain has descended across the continent." In 1949, Germany was formally split into two nations: a democratic West and a Communist East.

Though Berlin sat entirely in East Germany, American, French, and British forces controlled parts of West Berlin (see map, p. 15), which belonged to West Germany. Between 1949 and 1961, says historian Frederick Taylor, 2.5 million East Germans used Berlin as an "escape hatch" to get to the West.

Alarmed East German leaders tried to stop the exodus. On August 13, 1961, Berliners awoke to a barrier of concrete posts and barbed wire dividing the city. At an East Berlin train station, one elderly woman asked a guard when the next train to West Berlin would be.

"None of that anymore, Grandma," he said. "You're all [living] in a mousetrap now."

*continued on p. 14*

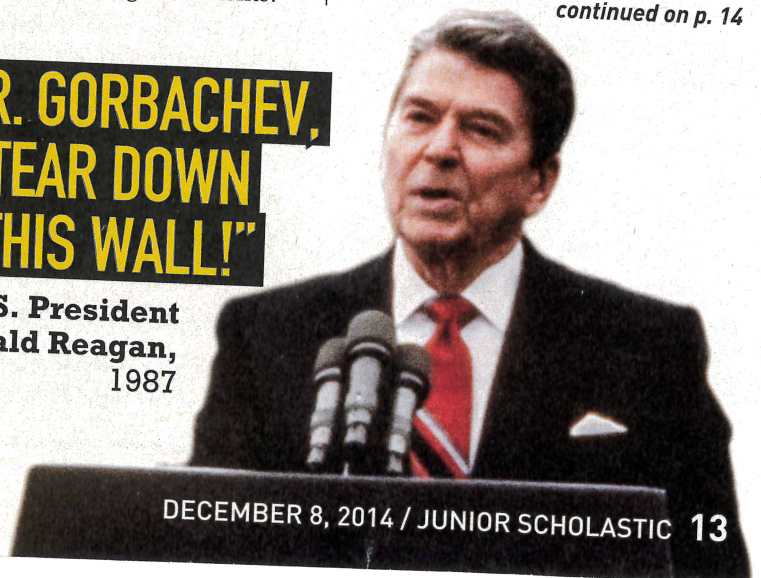


## Words to Know

- **Soviet Union** (*n*): a Communist nation made up of Russia and 14 other republics (1922-91)
- **Cold War** (*n*): a struggle between the U.S. and the Soviet Union and their allies (1945-91)

**"MR. GORBACHEV,  
TEAR DOWN  
THIS WALL!"**

—U.S. President  
Ronald Reagan,  
1987







1961

Left: Barbed wire in front of the Brandenburg Gate just weeks after Germans closed it off symbolizes a divided city. Below: The Wall divide communities and families.



East Germany soon began building the Wall itself. “In some cases, the Wall went down the middle of streets, brutally dividing neighborhoods and even families,” Taylor tells *JS*.

East Berliners were forced to live with the Wall—or die trying to cross it. Armed guards in watchtowers shot anyone trying to escape. But people never gave up. Over the years, about 5,000 made it, while another 5,000 were caught. Nearly 200 were killed.

Two American presidents famously condemned the barrier that cut East Germans off from the rest of the world. In a 1963 speech at the Brandenburg Gate, which had been a central passageway between East and West Berlin, John F. Kennedy declared, “*Ich bin ein Berliner!*” (“I am a Berliner!”) In 1987, Ronald Reagan challenged Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev: “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!”

### A New World

By then, the Soviets were losing their iron grip on Eastern Europe. In May 1989, a new government in Communist Hungary opened its border to neighboring Austria. Tens of thousands of East Germans rushed to “vacation” in Hungary, then escaped to the West from there.

On November 9, East German leaders risked offering a little freedom to stop the human tide. That evening, a stressed-out government official announced that East Germans could travel to the West without restrictions.

The reaction was explosive. An enormous crowd of ecstatic East Berliners, including Birgit Cristaudo, surged through checkpoints. West Berliners met them with flowers, chocolate, and wine. All night, a party raged in the streets.

By the next day, people were taking sledgehammers to the Wall. The hated structure came tumbling down. Soon, East Germany

agreed to allow free elections. The next year, West and East Germany reunited and elected a democratic government. In 1991, the Soviet Union itself collapsed. The Cold War was over.

Twenty-five years later, Germany has the world’s fourth-largest economy. A key American ally, it works with the U.S. to oppose aggressive moves by Russian President Vladimir Putin. In actions like seizing the Crimea from Ukraine, Putin has challenged the U.S. and the West in what many call a new Cold War.

As for Berliners who remember the Wall, the simple act of strolling through the Brandenburg Gate never gets old. “When we’re doing this,” writes historian Taylor, “and the sun is shining, sometimes we can believe that . . . the Berlin Wall was just a figment of somebody’s mad imagination.” —*Bryan Brown*



People tried many ways of getting over—or under—the Wall. Do some research, then report on the most creative methods of escape.



# Europe During the Cold War 1945-1991



## Questions

1. During the Cold War, the city of Berlin was located in which country?
2. What were the different sectors of Berlin?
3. During what years did the Berlin Wall exist?
4. What was the capital of West Germany?
5. The Iron Curtain ran between which seas?
6. Which Communist countries bordered the east side of the Iron Curtain?
7. Which Communist countries didn't border the Iron Curtain?
8. Which two Communist countries weren't aligned with the Soviet Union?
9. Why do you think "Iron Curtain" was used to describe the division of Europe?
10. Using a current map, answer: Which countries on this map no longer exist?