Dear Readers,

When I was your age, I lived in the German Democratic Republic. We knew neither democracy nor the rule of law in East Germany, and the world was extremely rewarding. The Peaceful Revolution and the fall of the Wall show what civil courage and fighting for one’s rights and freedoms can do.

It is said that history is the teacher of life. So, immerse yourself in life in the GDR and the events of 1989.

David Gill
Consul General of the Federal Republic of Germany
New York

David Gill, the incumbent Consul General of the Federal Republic of Germany in New York, and Diana Erinna, who teaches German in Boston, MA, will help you discover this fascinating chapter of post-war German history. Their eyewitness accounts will give you a better understanding of what everyday life felt like behind the Iron Curtain, what it meant to be involved in politics, and how that experience shaped their future life trajectories. Their oral histories are supplemented with facts to help you frame and articulate major events in post-war Germany (1945–1990).

While the booklet and accompanying videos are mostly in English, there are plenty of opportunities to test your German. We hope you enjoy discovering the fascinating events from our recent history!

Sincerely,

German Consulate General New York
Goethe-Institut New York
Goethe-Institut Boston

Dear Readers,

On the eve of the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, we invite German learners to explore the multitude of events, people, and narratives that marked the end of the Cold War and ushered in a new era in German and European history.

As a student of German, you have probably already been acquainted with the facts and striking imagery surrounding the fall of the Berlin Wall in your history classes. This multimedia booklet is designed to give you a firsthand account of the events that led to the collapse of the Iron Curtain in 1989.

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Nazi Germany unconditionally surrendered to the Allies on May 8, 1945, thus marking the end of World War II in Europe. The four major victorious powers—the United States, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and France—divided Germany’s territory as well as Berlin, the capital, into four occupation zones. Troops from other countries, including Belgium, Canada, Poland, Luxembourg, and a contingent of Danish and Norwegian forces were also stationed in these zones.
In 1949, two states were formed on German territory: In the Soviet zone, socialism was introduced with the founding of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), an undemocratic satellite state of the Soviet Union. The three other zones were merged into the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), a parliamentary democracy based on a social market economy.

Berlin was divided in two. Berlin’s Soviet occupation zone was declared the capital of the GDR, and Bonn became the capital of the Federal Republic of Germany.

Berlin had a special status: West Berlin (administered by the Western Allies) and East Berlin (administered by the Soviet Union) did not formally belong to the FRG or the GDR. Yet in everyday life, West Berlin was treated like part of the FRG, and East Berlin was treated like part of the GDR and its capital.

The borders between the GDR and the FRG ran along the present-day states of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Saxony-Anhalt, Thuringia, and Saxony as well as between West Berlin and the GDR, including East Berlin.

Do you want to know more about Germany after WWII, 1945-1949?

Use your phone to scan the QR code.
People from the Soviet Zone had been fleeing to the West since 1945. There were various reasons for this, including the forced collectivization of agriculture as well as dissatisfaction with the political situation and career prospects.

This exodus of often well-educated young people posed an existential threat to the economy of the GDR.
In August 1961, the leaders of the GDR decided to take radical measures to stop people from fleeing to West Germany. They closed the entire border with the Federal Republic of Germany and built a wall through Berlin. This had fatal consequences for the people in the East and West, especially in Berlin: Many families were torn apart and visiting was only possible under extremely difficult circumstances!

On June 26, 1963, US President John F. Kennedy, then on a visit to West Berlin, gave a speech that ended with the famous sentence: “Ich bin ein Berliner.”
The education system in the GDR

The education system in the GDR was centrally organized. The national educational objectives, focused on teaching skills to be good members of socialist society. All students initially attended the Polytechnische Oberschule (POS), a comprehensive general education school for 10 years. This was a mass organization. The education system in the GDR was divided into lower, middle, and upper class levels. This was a comprehensive general education school for 10 years. The education system in the GDR was centrally organized. The national educational objectives focused on teaching skills to be good members of socialist society. All students initially attended the Polytechnische Oberschule (POS), a comprehensive general education school for 10 years.

The FDJ

The Free Deutsche Jugend (FDJ) was the only state-recognized and sponsored youth organization. As a mass organization, it was defined as part of the state educational system outside of school. These higher education options also depended on the students' civic engagement, membership in mass organizations like the FDJ, and even their family background. This was a comprehensive general education school for 10 years. The education system in the GDR was divided into lower, middle, and upper class levels. This was a comprehensive general education school for 10 years.

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Tourism in the GDR

GDR citizens enjoyed traveling to the Baltic Sea islands of Rügen and Usedom, Saxon Switzerland, and the Thuringian Forest. It was only possible to travel abroad to countries within the former Eastern Bloc. Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria were popular travel destinations, although it was sometimes necessary to apply for a travel permit to travel outside the GDR. Within the GDR, citizens could generally enjoy the advantages of a number of recreational facilities offered through their workplaces and unions as well as state campgrounds.

Faktencheck DDR

Es gibt über die DDR viele Mythen. Was ist korrekt, was ist falsch?

Mythos 1: In der DDR gab es keine Bananen.
Mythos 2: In der DDR gab es keine Arbeitslosen.
Mythos 3: In der DDR gab es ein bezahltes Baby-Jahr für die Mutter.
Mythos 4: In der DDR gab es keine Telefone.
Mythos 5: In der DDR wartete man 10-15 Jahre auf ein Auto.

Ask David Gill:

What made you different from your peers?

Ask David Gill:

What was known about West Germany, what was unknown?

David Gill:

“To me, it seemed as though three-quarters of East Germans watched West German TV.”

TESTIMONIAL

Ask David Gill:

What freedoms did citizens of the GDR have?

Myth 1: wrong
Myth 2: correct; full employment was a major political goal in the GDR.
Myth 3: correct
Myth 4: wrong; but there were only few.
Myth 5: correct
Diana Erinna was born in Glauchau (Saxony) in 1970 and grew up there as an only child. Her father was the technical director of the local hospital. Like David Gill, Diana Erinna learned as a child that she lived in a country where freedom was limited and where the government dictated which career you were allowed (or not allowed) to have.

In the GDR, the majority of the population watched West German television. However, there were two areas where it was very difficult to pick up a West German TV signal — in the utmost northeastern part of the GDR, around Dresden and in the eastern part of Saxony.

For this reason, these areas came to be known colloquially as the “Tal der Ahnungslosen” (“Valley of the Clueless”).

Do you speak GDR?

In der DDR wurden Wörter aus dem Westen (englische Wörter) “eingedeutscht”. Wie hießen diese Wörter in der DDR?

Verbinden Sie die Wörter!

A Kaktus
B Hot Dog
C Stuntman
D Breakdancer
E Plastikflasche
F Frisbee
G Darts
H Brathähnchen

1 Wurfscheibe
2 akrobatischer Volkstänzer
3 Grilletta
4 Broiler
5 Ketwurst
6 Plastebeutel
7 Wurfspiel
8 Wurfgerät

A4, B6, C2, D3, E7, F8, G1, H5

Military instruction in the GDR

In 1978, Wehrunterricht (military instruction) became a mandatory subject at all polytechnical and extended secondary schools in the GDR. Boys and girls were taught basic knowledge about the military, including practical training. For the boys, this involved mandatory participation in a two-week military camp. This training was usually conducted by NVA reserve officers and included endurance training, shooting air rifles, and training on how to throw hand grenades. The girls had to take a course in civil defense, which trained them in first aid and evacuation procedures. The overall goal of military instruction was to prepare students for possible basic military service and encourage them to consider a career in the military.

Diana Erinna spread the word about her mother’s story via her Instagram page with the hashtag #UnsererMuttererErinnerungen.

The very first day of school in 1977

Civil Defense, 1988/89

Trip to the Havel, 1978

Military training in high school

We weren’t allowed to trade chewing gum pictures.

What was a typical school day like?

Diana Erinna was born in Glauchau (Saxony) in 1970 and grew up there as an only child. Her father was the technical director of the local hospital. Like David Gill, Diana Erinna learned as a child that she lived in a country where freedom was limited and where the government dictated which career you were allowed (or not allowed) to have.
Wie heißen diese Aktivitäten auf Deutsch?

- to sleep
- to eat
- to learn
- to study
- to drink
- to dance

Diana Erinna:

"When I was 14, I started to go clubbing, and my parents would allow me to come home at around 2 o'clock in the morning."

"I had really hoped that my mother would stay in West Germany."

"What was known about West Germany, what was unknown?"

- military camp (das Wehrlager)
- course in civil defense (der Lehrgang für Zivilverteidigung (ZV))
- evacuation measures (die Evakuierungsmaßnahmen)
- military instruction (der Wehrunterricht)
- military basic knowledge (das militärische Grundlagenwissen)
- National People’s Army officer (der NVA-Offizier)
- military reserve force (die Reserve)
- compulsory military service (die Wehrpflicht)
- professional soldier (der/die Berufssoldat*in)
- West German television (das Westdeutsche Fernsehen)

Testimonial:

Ask Diana Erinna: How did school influence your private life?

Ask Diana Erinna: To what extent were young people in the GDR less free?

Ask Diana Erinna: To what extent were young people in the GDR less free?

Ask Diana Erinna: Were you able to visit relatives in West Germany?

1970
Diana Erinna continued

1970
Karl-Eduard von Schnitzler ran a notorious propaganda TV show about West Germany on GDR TV.

Trip to Dresden, summer 1989
West German public TV main news broadcast 1970s

1985
With a SIMSON S50 moped, Diana Erinna continued

High school excursion, 1988
Sign at the Brandenburg Gate on the West Berlin side, 1986

Attention!
You are now leaving West Berlin

Trip to Dresden, summer 1989
The lack of freedoms led to dissatisfaction among the GDR’s population. Yet, there was no open opposition to the regime. The Protestant church played a significant role in the opposition. To some extent, it offered a safe haven for individuals and small groups that criticized the political system. But this meant having to take great risks and accepting the consequences.

However, fleeing the GDR was extremely dangerous, and those who attempted it faced harsh sentences if they were caught.

“Did you ever think about fleeing the GDR?”

David Gill: “There was no opposition in a way you would describe it in a democratic society.”

“Was there any opposition to the regime?”

Diana Erinna: “I wanted to take my life in my own hands.”

“Were you afraid to flee?”

Diana Erinna: “This was the obstacle that had to be overcome. The inner German border.”

The GDR’s repressive border security was mainly intended to keep people inside the country. The border troops were supposed to prevent GDR citizens from escaping the GDR at all costs. There were automatic firing systems and soldiers had orders to shoot. Yet, this did not stop people from fleeing the GDR by crossing the Berlin Wall or the inner German border. There were countless escape attempts—some successful, others ended in death. Along the Berlin Wall alone, at least 140 people were killed between 1961 and 1989.

“In the GDR, there was no opposition in a way you would describe it in a democratic society.”

David Gill: “The church was the only organization in East Germany which was not ruled by the Communist Party.”

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In the early 1980s, the Eastern Bloc experienced a period of economic stagnation. Under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev, the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, the USSR responded by introducing a reform program in 1985. Other countries in the Eastern Bloc (Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia) also began to show initial signs of collapse.

Nevertheless, the leadership of the GDR continued its relentless political course, which fueled the opposition against the regime and drove people to the streets. The churches played a significant role in the opposition’s peaceful protests.

In June 1987, US President Ronald Reagan visited West Berlin, where he gave a speech on June 12th.

“General Secretary Gorbachev, if you seek peace, if you seek prosperity for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, if you seek liberalization, come here to this gate. Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate. Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!”

“People were fed up, after all... they were encouraged by what happened.”

SUMMER

Watch US President Ronald Reagan’s speech at the Brandenburg Gate

Know your rights: Verbinden Sie die Wörter!

A Meinungsfreiheit 1 Freedom to travel
B Pressefreiheit 2 Legal equality
C Religionsfreiheit 3 Freedom of expression
D Versammlungsfreiheit 4 Freedom of assembly
E Studienfreiheit 5 Right to property
F Abstimmungsfreiheit 6 Freedom of press
G Rechtsgleichheit 7 Freedom of religion
H Religionsfreiheit 8 Artistic freedom
I Briefgeheimnis 9 Freedom of association
J Recht auf Eigentum 10 Freedom of association

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SUMMER
In the late 1980s, the situation in the GDR got even worse. The country was politically isolated, the economy was in ruins, and the state was nearly insolvent. When Hungary removed its border fence with Austria in the summer of 1989, thousands of GDR citizens fled to the Federal Republic of Germany through Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Austria. One of these refugees was Diana Ernina.

In response to the mass exodus of GDR citizens via the Hungarian-Austrian border, GDR authorities no longer authorized travel to Hungary. Thousands of GDR citizens responded by storming the Federal Republic of Germany’s embassies in Prague and Warsaw. There was such a great onslaught that the GDR government finally relented and allowed them to emigrate.

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Diana Ernina: “I remember my dad coming up to my room and he was crying.”

Ask Diana Ernina: “What did your parents think about your plan to flee the GDR?”

Diana Ernina: “...I could see Austria.”

Markieren Sie auf der Karte den Fluchtweg von Diana Ernina aus der DDR in die BRD!

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Ask Diana Ernina: “What did your parents think about your second-class citizen?” And I said: “Nothing!”

Diana Ernina: “I remember my dad coming up to my room and he was crying.”

Ask Diana Ernina: “What did your parents think about your second attempt to flee the GDR?”

Diana Ernina: “...I could see Austria.”

What did your parents think about your plan to flee the GDR?

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Glossary

Austria
Österreich
Austrian border
die österreichische Grenze
embassy
die Botschaft
foreign policy
die Außenpolitik
GDR government
die DDR-Regierung
insolvency
die Zahlungsunfähigkeit
international isolation
die außenpolitische Isolation
mass exodus
die Massenflucht
border security
die Grenzsicherung
Austria
Österreich
Austrian border
die österreichische Grenze
embassy
die Botschaft
foreign policy
die Außenpolitik
GDR government
die DDR-Regierung
insolvency
die Zahlungsunfähigkeit
international isolation
die außenpolitische Isolation
mass exodus
die Massenflucht
border security
die Grenzsicherung
In September 1989, peaceful demonstrations started to be held every Monday in various cities across the GDR. They came to be known as the Montagsdemonstrationen (Monday demonstrations).

A growing number of people joined the protests, despite the fear that the government would take action against the demonstrators. Yet, this did not happen. This led to more demonstrations with even more people participating. When 10,000 people peacefully demonstrated in Leipzig on October 9th without any government interference, it became clear that the Peaceful Revolution would succeed.

The Monday demonstrations were the largest protests over the 40 years of the GDR. The popular uprising on June 17, 1953, had been suppressed with the massive deployment of the military, the Volkspolizei, and the Stasi (State Security Service). To commemorate this event, the Federal Republic of Germany observed June 17th as a public holiday from 1954 to 1990.

The Monday demonstrations were the largest protests in the GDR since 1953. The popular uprising on June 17, 1953, had been suppressed with the massive deployment of the military, the Volkspolizei, and the Stasi (State Security Service). To commemorate this event, the Federal Republic of Germany observed June 17th as a public holiday from 1954 to 1990.

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On November 9, 1989, the unthinkable happened: At the end of a press conference, the Secretary of Information, Günter Schabowski, accidentally announced that the citizens of the GDR were free to leave the country “effective immediately.”

The rest is history — the Wall had come down!

Thousands of GDR citizens stormed their way directly to the border crossings and to the Brandenburg Gate.

When the Wall between East and West Berlin was opened on November 9, 1989, neither David Gill nor Diana Erinna were in Berlin. They heard about the fall of the Berlin Wall in West German media and reacted to the historic news very differently.

Watch the video: ABC News: The Berlin Wall Falls

Watch the video: Sky News: The Fall of the Berlin Wall

Watch the video: A stroke of fate that changed history: Germany: Berlin Wall anniversary

Dismantling the Stasi, the GDR’s intelligence apparatus, was one of the most important priorities for the population. The Ministerium für Staatssicherheit (Stasi, Ministry of State Security) had collected information on GDR residents, West Germans, and foreigners for surveillance purposes. In addition to official Stasi employees, there were also many informants who spied on their neighbors, friends, and even family members.

Glossary

border checkpoint der Grenzübergang
Secretary of Information der Sekretär für Informationswesen
informant der/die Informant*in
Ministry of State Security das Ministerium für Staatssicherheit (Stasi)
surveillance die Überwachung

People climbed the Berlin Wall at the Brandenburg Gate and celebrated on the night of November 9, 1989.

GDR border officers trying to control the masses coming to cross through the border checkpoints in Berlin.

Mission impossible.

New Year’s Eve 1989 at the Brandenburg Gate

People celebrating the opening of the border between East and West on November 10, 1989.

David Gill:

“...it was a big party, happiness, people were overwhelmed…”

Ask David Gill: What made the Peaceful Revolution possible?

Diana Erinna:

“...when the Wall came down (…) I was crying. But those weren’t really tears of joy…”

Ask Diana Erinna: How did you hear about the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989?

David Gill:

“...for this reason alone the Stasi focused on him very much (…) they wanted to know how we thought.”

Ask David Gill: Did the Stasi generate documents about you and your family?

“...it was a big party, happiness; people were overwhelmed…”

Ask David Gill: Did the Stasi generate documents about you and your family?

Günter Schabowski at the press conference on November 9, 1989

“...when the Wall came down I was crying. But those weren’t really tears of joy…”

Ask Diana Erinna: How did you feel after the Wall had fallen?

“Nobody expected the fall of the Wall overnight.”

Ask David Gill: How did you hear about the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989?
The fall of the Berlin Wall posed new challenges for the governments of the GDR and the Federal Republic of Germany. Just a few days after the fall of the Wall, a new interim government in the GDR was brought in and a Central Round Table was formed with the goal of initiating reforms. The central question was: What would happen next in the GDR? This was something the people in the GDR were asking. The fall of the Wall gave them greater hope for more freedom. Would this actually happen? And what would the fall of the Wall mean for the people who had fled the GDR?

...in the events of this poor economy, they got unemployed...

"Initially, the people of East Germany fell freed. The unexpected and unbelievable had happened."

What happened to your family and friends in the GDR?

Ask Diana Erinna:

What happened to your family and friends in the GDR?

Diana Erinna:

"...in the events of this poor economy, they got unemployed..."
In March 1990, the first free elections were held in the GDR. This was followed by numerous other reforms and negotiations on reunifying Germany between the two German states and the Four Powers that occupied Germany at the end of World War II (2+4 Talks). And on October 3, 1990, something happened that would have been absolutely unimaginable just a year before: Germany became a reunified country.

In the decades since, people in East Germany have done an incredible job rebuilding the country and can be very proud of all that has been accomplished. While there are still some differences between East and West Germany, one thing is certain. As a result of the fall of the Wall, millions of Germans— including Diana Erinna and David Gill— gained new freedoms that opened up doors and opportunities beyond their wildest dreams.

In the last 30 years since the Wall practically fell overnight, the people in East Germany have done an incredible job rebuilding the country and can be very proud of all that has been accomplished. While there are still some structural differences between former East and West Germany, one thing is certain: As a result of the fall of the Wall, millions of Germans—including Diana Erinna and David Gill— gained new freedoms that opened up doors and opportunities beyond their wildest dreams.
For Diana Ernina, fleeing the GDR was a decisive event in her life, leaving behind scars that have impacted her to this day!

Diana Ernina ...

...for many years, I also couldn’t talk about all these events...

Diana Ernina ...

...I always wanted to teach German abroad...

Diana Ernina ...

...I didn’t feel the desire to go there, but once I was there I was very nice (...) it’s wonderful to smell the environment

Diana Ernina ...

...I didn’t feel the desire to go there, but once I was there I was very nice (...) it’s wonderful to smell the environment

Ask Diana Ernina: Is it hard for you to talk about the events?

Ask Diana Ernina: Is Germany a united country today?

Ask Diana Ernina: Did you ever return to the GDR after the fall of the Wall?

Quiz zum Abschluss

Frage 1: Was ist die Jugendweihe?

A eine religiöse Feier
B eine Party in der Schule
C eine sozialistische Jugendfeier

Frase 2: Was war die Freie Deutsche Jugend (FDJ)?

A eine private Jugendorganisation
B ein sozialistischer Sportclub
C eine staatliche Jugendorganisation

Frase 3: Was waren die „Montagsdemonstrationen“?

A Proteste in der BRD
B Friedliche Massendemonstrationen in der DDR
C Proteste am Montag in Ost-Berlin

Frase 4: Wann fiel die Grenze zwischen der DDR und der BRD?

A 8. November 1990
B 3. Oktober 1989

Frase 5: Was war am 3. Oktober 1990?

A der Fall der Berliner Mauer
B die Deutsche Wiedervereinigung
C Proteste gegen die DDR-Regierung

Answer:

1C, 2C, 3B, 4C, 5B

54

“Point Alpha” memorial site at Geisa

Sign Translation

“German History Memorial
Border installations (of the former GDR)
Protected as a historic monument
Please do not destroy!”

Glossary

national holiday der nationalfeiertag
Day of German Unity der Tag der Deutschen Einheit

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A 8. November 1990
B 3. Oktober 1989

Frase 5: Was war am 3. Oktober 1990?

A der Fall der Berliner Mauer
B die Deutsche Wiedervereinigung
C Proteste gegen die DDR-Regierung

Answer:

1C, 2C, 3B, 4C, 5B

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“Point Alpha” memorial site at Geisa

Sign Translation

“German History Memorial
Border installations (of the former GDR)
Protected as a historic monument
Please do not destroy!”

Glossary

national holiday der nationalfeiertag
Day of German Unity der Tag der Deutschen Einheit
Konzept/Concept
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Goethe-Institut New York
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