

Analyzing Primary Sources

The Fall of the Berlin Wall

The Berlin Wall, built in 1961, was an ugly concrete symbol of the divisions between East Germany and West Germany. This eyewitness account of its fall is by Kathryn Richardson, an American who had recently graduated from college.

Last November [1989], my friend Laura and I flew from London to Germany for an eight-hour party at the Berlin Wall, ten days after the Communist border opened. Capitalistic agencies had been cashing in on the latest tourist craze, creating charter flights overnight and making airline tickets as readily available to British travelers as hammers and chisels were to Berlin visitors. We arrived in West Berlin at about 10:00 A.M., boarded a tour bus, and drove through the Tiergarten, a huge park that was stripped of its wood for fuel during World War II. Our guide pointed out the Brandenburg Gate, which was built between 1788 and 1791 as a victory arch for the Prussian armies. But the most beautiful historic buildings loomed mysteriously beyond the structure we were anxiously approaching—the Berlin Wall itself.

Hundreds of people were pointing and hacking away at the surface of this twenty-eight-mile scar. Eager to chop at the decaying monster ourselves, Laura and I borrowed tools from a fourteen-year-old East Berliner. His exhilarated mother explained to us in English that her son had just met his cousin—who lived in West Berlin—for the first time. “They are the same age,” she said, “and now they can play together every day. They just ate three pounds of chocolate, and he just had his first Coca-Cola.”

We hugged her good-bye and headed back to the bus, our pockets jammed full of souvenir Wall chips. I

had thought West Berliners would object to hundreds of thousands of East Germans flocking to their city. Now I understood that many of these people were family members who had been separated [for nearly thirty years] by a structure built in under twenty-four hours. Our driver then took us to Checkpoint Charlie, the notorious stopping point between West and East Berlin where your identification is checked. After an hour, we entered East Berlin.

It was as empty as an old ghost town. We saw only three people on the main avenue, *Unter den Linden* (“Under the Lime Trees”). Ahead of us was the eastern side of the Wall, as empty of graffiti as the western side was swimming in it; it looked as if it hadn’t been touched since the night it was built twenty-nine years ago.

We drove to Humboldt, the largest university in East Germany, and parked next to the empty stretch of concrete where the Nazis had ordered thousands of well-known and important books to be burned in 1933 because they disagreed with Nazi doctrine. Then we headed back to Checkpoint Charlie. We caught our flight back to London, where we were living for the year, and all we could think about was how happy we were to be Americans—and that those German boys had eaten three pounds of chocolate!

From Kathryn Richardson, “The Fall of the Wall,” *Seventeen Magazine* (August 1990).

1. What did the American visitors realize about the Germans on the east and west sides of the Berlin Wall?
2. Why do you suppose that the eastern side of the Wall was “as empty of graffiti as the western side was swimming in it”?
3. Richardson said, “All we could think about was how happy we were to be Americans.” Why do you think she said this?
4. **Analysis.** What was the significance of the fall of the Berlin Wall? Why would it be a major tourist attraction?