

**JHSSMUN**

Backgrounder Guide



HCC

# **BERLIN CRISIS OF 1961**

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# Director's Letter

Dear Delegates,

My name is Manasbir Bagri, and I am delighted to be the chair of the Historical Crisis Committee this year for the first iteration of JHSSMUN 2023. As an 11th-grade student at Johnston Heights, it would be my honor to welcome you to our first Model United Nations conference and to make it a memorable experience. I believe MUN is an excellent way for students to display their abilities in a competitive, fast-paced environment filled with debate.

With cooperation with the dais, we will be orchestrating what is arguably the climax of East-West tensions during the Cold War, The Berlin Crisis of 1961. We chose this topic for the Historical Crisis Committee as it is a historical event I have always been fascinated with. The Berlin Crisis is a display of how much the United States of America was willing to compromise for diplomacy and the power of mutually assured destruction. This crisis was the product of the treaties that occurred after World War II. It led to one of the most inspiring fights for freedom in history and was a major cause of the fall of the Soviet Union.

The dais recommends delegates have strong knowledge beforehand to be prepared for the unexpected turns that occur during the crisis committees. We look forward to moderating and listening to your fruitful debates!

Best Regards,  
Manasbir Bagri  
Director of HCC

For any inquiries, contact us at:  
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# Committee Overview

Historical Crisis Committee (HCC) is a committee that focuses on a past crisis rather than a current one. A key difference between HCC and other committees is that instead of playing the roles/delegations of countries, you take the role of historical figures and represent their wants, goals, and ideologies. This is what makes HCC is higher level committee where some past Model United Nations is strongly advised as expectations are higher.

The Berlin Crisis of 1961 was a pivotal period in history that showed how much compromise is needed for diplomacy. It occurred post WWII during the height of the cold war. The two primary powers in this conflict were the United States of America (USA) and the Soviet Union (USSR), with support from other powers such as the United Kingdom (UK) and France. It soon became a test of how much the USA would concede and how much the USSR would demand through ultimatums.

This committee takes place in what can be considered the peak of the crisis, where tensions were at an all-time high, and the West had to cut negotiations to maintain diplomacy. The Berlin wall prevented East Germans from seeking refuge in West Germany to escape communism.<sup>1</sup> The USA had to choose between allowing the USSR to continue building the Berlin Wall or risking war to allow East Germans to immigrate to West Germany. The USSR frequently attempted to pressure the USA to withdraw their troops as Khrushchev (leader of the Soviet Union) saw how the West was easily swayed during the Vienna summit.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mighty, 23 Apr. 2021, <https://www.wearethemighty.com/mighty-history/6-ways-east-germans-escaped/>.

<sup>2</sup> Little, Becky. "JFK Was Completely Unprepared for His Summit with Khrushchev." History.com, A&E Television Networks, 13 July 2018, <https://www.history.com/news/kennedy-krushchev-vienna-summit-meeting-1961>.

# Current Crisis Update

After the Vienna Summit and during the Cold War, Germany is split into two states: the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). As the GDR discovers many of their citizens have escaped through West Berlin to get to the FRG, they enforce strict travel laws to prohibit citizens from leaving East Germany. On the morning of August 13, 1961, the USSR places their troops along the West-East Berlin border and begins constructing-



a wall of barbed wire, making any travel to West Berlin impossible. The Western powers do not want communist suppression preventing East Germans from entering the FRG, but also want to avoid conflict at all costs because of the prospect of nuclear war. Despite knowing of the USSR's intentions to construct the wall in advance, they abstain from interference due to the threat of nuclear war. Construction of the wall has just begun, and it seems that the Soviet Union does not plan to stop it. It is up to you delegates to determine the fate of not just the East and West Germans but the entire world.

# Topic History

After WWII and the fall of Germany, the four victors took control of the nation: France, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, and the Soviet Union. Germany and its capital, Berlin, were each split into four territories as a temporary in waiting for plans to unify Germany.<sup>3</sup> Germany was split as the Allies were not comfortable with the perpetrator of both the previous World Wars to remain armed and independent. A revision of Germany's territories happened during the Potsdam conference where Poland got a large sum of land to compensate for their loss of land.<sup>4</sup>

However, the western powers wanted to establish a liberal market while the USSR wanted to expand their communist ideologies to a unified Germany.<sup>5</sup> What came as a result was a division between Germany: Western Powers united their three territories of Germany<sup>6</sup> and the USSR established a communist East Germany. Neither became independent states until later.

Another issue was that Berlin was divided into four as a part of the initial treaty that formed after defeating the Axis powers in WWII: West Berlin allied with the West and East Berlin allied with the USSR. The GDR borders encompassed West and East Berlin despite them having different political ideologies and being owned by different states. This was not an issue initially, but later became the sole reason for this crisis and many more.<sup>7</sup>

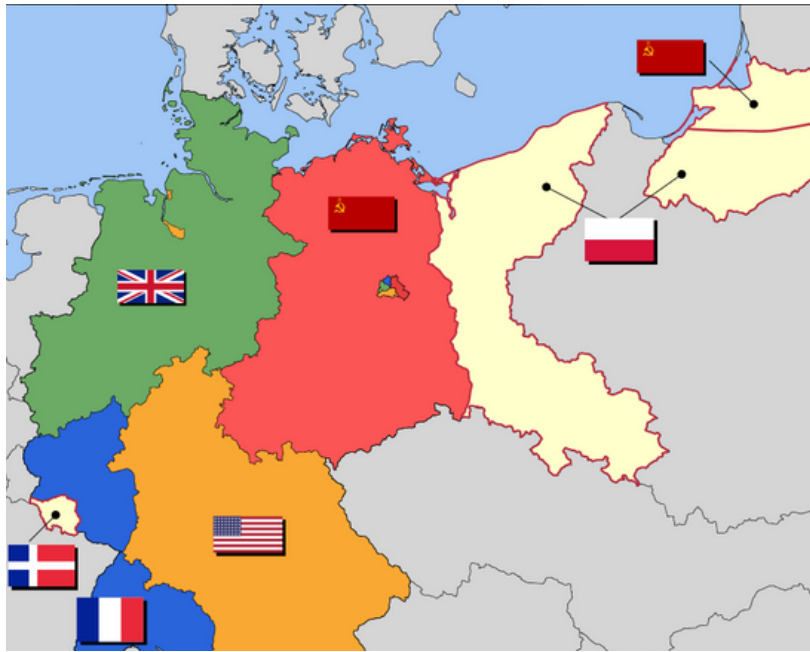
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<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of State, U.S. Department of State, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1937-1945/potsdam-conf>.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of State, U.S. Department of State, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1937-1945/potsdam-conf>.

<sup>5</sup> The Rise and Fall of the Berlin Wall - Konrad H. Jarausch." TED, TED-Ed, <https://ed.ted.com/lessons/the-rise-and-fall-of-the-berlin-wall-konrad-h-jarausch>.





*Germany when it was split into four territories prior to the forming of the FRG*

The GDR portrayed itself as the communist resistance against Hitler while portraying West Germany as a continuation of the Nazi regime. The GDR boasted its free healthcare<sup>8</sup> and education, however, the FRG had higher salaries, more commodities, and more individual freedom.<sup>9</sup>

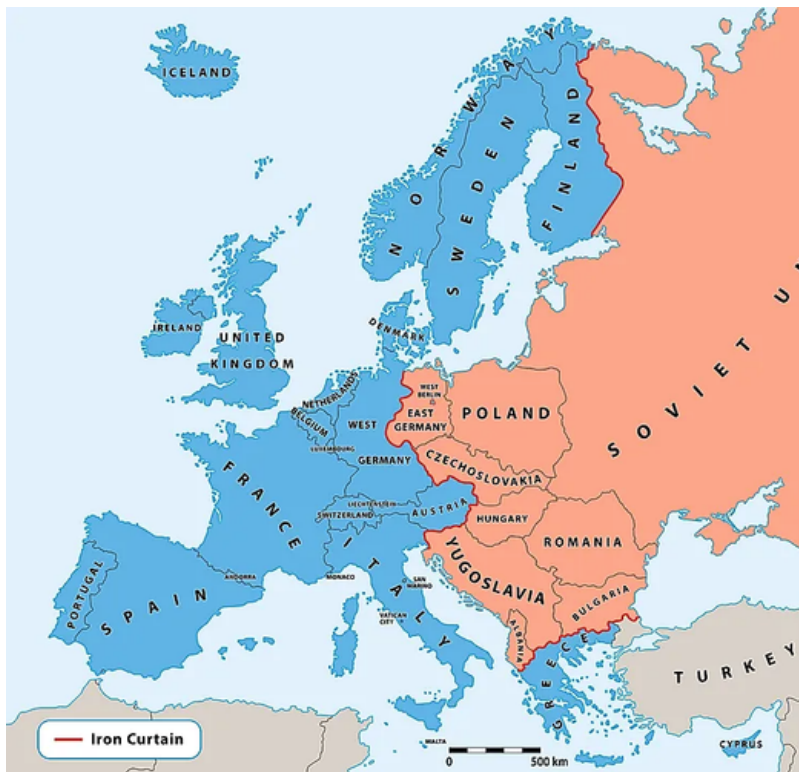
The USSR set ultimatums for the Western powers to demilitarize West Berlin and the FRG. The USA did not want to withdraw their troops as it wanted to maintain a presence within Berlin's borders but also did not want to provoke the USSR, risking war. The history of the Berlin border is full of the USSR not wanting US troops to enter the entirety of Germany, arousing political tensions in Germany and Berlin in particular.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> "Formation of the German Democratic Republic." Encyclopædia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., <https://www.britannica.com/place/Germany/Formation-of-the-German-Democratic-Republic>.

<sup>7</sup> Lowndes, Coleman. "The Mistake That Toppled the Berlin Wall." Vox, Vox, 8 Nov. 2019, <https://www.vox.com/videos/2019/11/8/20955442/mistake-that-toppled-berlin-wall>.

Passing between the GDR and the FRG was difficult due to a border created by the Soviet Union. This border was known as the “Iron Curtain,” and was a nearly impassable border cutting the rest of Europe off. The Soviet Union considered losing citizens to other European nations a direct loss to the Western powers. The Soviet Union enforced extremely strict travel laws to essentially keep all of their people – their workforce, from leaving to join the Western Powers.



Blue: Western Bloc - Red: Eastern Bloc

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<sup>8</sup> Wall Museum. “GDR Health System.” Wall Museum, 12 June 2021, <https://thewallmuseum.com/en/gdr-health-system/>.

<sup>9</sup> The Rise and Fall of the Berlin Wall - Konrad H. Jarausch.” TED, TED-Ed, <https://ed.ted.com/lessons/the-rise-and-fall-of-the-berlin-wall-konrad-h-jarausch>.

<sup>10</sup> “The Berlin Airlift, 1948–1949.” U.S. Department of State, U.S. Department of State, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/berlin-airlift>



A workaround that arose despite these measures was that getting from East Berlin and West Berlin was as easy as walking over, then getting to West Germany was simple from there. The Soviet Union found this was a threat to their economy, as they had lost over 20% of their population (3.5 million people) to the FRG. Walter Ulbricht, the Chairman of the State Council of East Germany, suggested something had to be done and was pressuring Khrushchev to take urgent action. Ulbricht suggested that the border be closed completely. If this were to happen and the USSR rendered complete control of East Berlin to the GDR, it would mean that the USA could only communicate with West Berlin only with explicit permission from the East German government. This was a very important consideration taken when JFK headed into the Vienna Summit.

They planned to build a wall to block East Germans from getting to West Berlin. This area would be patrolled by guards where any attempts to go through the border would result in being shot on site. This wall would divide neighbourhoods, separating communism and democracy. The Soviet's chose to do this after Khrushchev realized JFK was easily pushed around at the Vienna Summit.

The GDR then began stockpiling barbed wire to construct this wall while avoiding suspicion. The Western powers had known about the USSR's intentions but chose not to interfere after a secret meeting on August 4-7, 1961, in Paris, with the USA, UK, France, and West Germany. The USSR found out about this meeting shortly after through one of their spies.

The wall was built swiftly on August 13, 1961, as one morning Berlin residents found troops standing in a line blocking the border between West and East Berlin. During this time the barbed wire was quickly being set up. It was a sign of the unfortunate fate of East Germans who were hoping for higher freedoms in the West.

Beyond this committee, what happened was that the West allowed this wall to be built as an effort to avoid war. This led to a military stand-off which got resolved after both parties slowly backed their tanks away. Many more crises took place afterwards relating to the cold war in different parts of the world, but Germany and especially Berlin remained a place of high tension until the end of the GDR and USSR. This wall was eventually taken down about thirty years later due to a misunderstanding in the GDR government and civil revolutions. This was one of the greatest displays of what humans would do for freedom in history, showing that no walls could prevent people from being free.



*The Berlin Wall being torn down in 1989, a sign that nothing could stop people from achieving their desired freedom.*

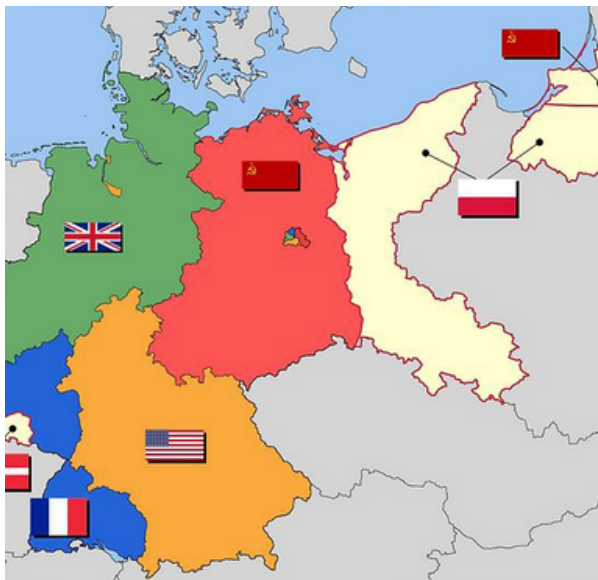
# Timeline

## **May 8, 1945** - End of World War II in Europe

The Axis Powers (Italy, Germany, and Japan) were defeated by the Allied Powers (the Soviet Union, the USA, and the UK) ending the Second World War and creating issues regarding Germany, the perpetrator of both World Wars. So, they organized the Potsdam Conference.

## **July 17, 1945 - August 2, 1945** - Potsdam Conference

The Potsdam Conference occurred after Germany surrendered, it was organized to determine the postwar borders of Europe.<sup>11</sup> It was hard to negotiate Germany's borders at this time as there were no clear directives or common enemy. It was decided to completely demilitarize and disarm Germany and rebuilt the German educational and judicial system to purge it of any authoritarian and discriminatory influences.



It was decided that Germany would be divided into four territories and that Poland would receive a considerable sum of German territory to counteract the amount it lost from the revision of the Soviet-Polish border. These four territories between the UK, USSR, USA, and France were meant as a temporary division of Germany and its capital Berlin. The reconstitution of Germany was postponed indefinitely.<sup>12</sup>

### **September 2, 1945** - End of World War II

Japan officially surrendered marking the end of the second World War. This was a great victory for the Allied powers and the start of the Cold War pursued shortly after.

### **Jun 24, 1948 – May 12, 1949** - Berlin Airlift

The Berlin Airlift crisis occurred when Soviet forces blockaded rail, road, and water access to the western-controlled areas of Berlin.<sup>13</sup> The USA and UK responded by airlifting fuel and food to Berlin from West Germany through designated routes until this blockade was gone. The blockade was taken down once the USSR realized the Western powers could airlift supplies indefinitely. This was one of the first crises that emerged from this separation of Germany.

### **October 7, 1949** - The German Democratic Republic was formed

The GDR was formed by the USSR to represent the spread of communism throughout Europe and to make East Germany its own state.

### **May 5, 1949** – Western Forces end their military occupation of West Germany

This made West Germany an independent country, which led to them joining NATO four days later. There was some reluctance from a few European nations like France, who believed that Germany shouldn't be rearmed despite them being an ally due to their past. The USA believed that it was necessary to set up a defence against potential Soviet attempts at expansion.

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<sup>11</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., <https://www.britannica.com/video/180248/Overview-Potsdam-Conference>

<sup>12</sup> U.S. Department of State, U.S. Department of State, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1937-1945/potsdam>

<sup>13</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., <https://www.britannica.com/video/180251/Overview-airlift-fuel-food-supplies-British-West>.



JFK and Nikita Khrushchev

### **June 4, 1961 - Vienna Summit**

The Vienna Summit in Vienna, Austria was organized to discuss a potential peace treaty between the USA and USSR or disarmament of Germany and discuss other related matters at the time like Laos. JFK was advised to not ask for this summit as he had just taken the role of President and tensions were very high. He did so despite the warnings as he believed it was

important for an informal exchange of views between the two leaders, and due to tensions being very high after the Bay of Pigs Invasion. The Berlin question of whether the USA would allow the USSR to sign a separate peace treaty with Berlin was a large part of what was discussed at the summit.<sup>14</sup> A peace treaty would threaten the USA's influence of East Germany and the balance of power at the time.

The outcome of this summit was largely seen as positive for the USA as it showed that diplomatic solutions were possible at the time and that the USA was not willing to compromise on withdrawing from Berlin. It could also be seen as negative as Khrushchev outmatched JFK in debates and pushed JFK around due to his lack of experience at the time.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> "The Vienna Summit." StudySmarter US, <https://www.studysmarter.us/explanations/history/cold-war/the-vienna-summit/>.

<sup>15</sup> Little, Becky. "JFK Was Completely Unprepared for His Summit with Khrushchev." History.com, A&E Television Networks, 13 July 2018, <https://www.history.com/news/kennedy-krushchev-vienna-summit-meeting-1961>.

# Bloc Positions

## **Eastern Bloc:**

The Eastern Bloc believes the wall should remain and continue building and that traveling should be impossible. The threat of losing more citizens to the FRG is too great. They support the Berlin Wall and the Iron Wall that divides Europe. The Eastern Bloc tends to be the aggressors in this crisis as Khrushchev realized early, that JFK was easily pushed around. They want communism to prosper in East Germany and within Europe. Members of this Bloc are the USSR, GDR, and any of their allies like the Arab bloc and other socialist states.

## **Western Bloc:**

The Western Bloc believes the wall should be taken down, and the East Germans should be free to travel and immigrate where they please. They should be able to emigrate to a capitalistic society whenever they please, this would mean that they are against the Berlin Wall and the Iron Wall. The Western Bloc will do everything in its power to achieve this but is avoiding the risk of war at all costs, so negotiating with the Eastern Bloc proves to be difficult. They do not want communism to spread, as the West was very anti-communist. The USA did not recognize the GDR as a nation then. Members of this Bloc include all NATO members including the FRG.



# Potential Solutions

## **Let the formation of the wall continue:**

Letting the wall continue would allow for a peaceful relationship between the Western and Eastern Blocs, decreasing tensions during the tense Cold War. In exchange, East Germans have no freedom of mobility outside of their country. The USSR may try to test their power/threat of violence more, forcing the USA to cut negotiations to avoid total nuclear war. This solution means the results won't change.



## **Halt the formation of the and demolish of the wall:**

After negotiations, the USSR agreed to tear down the wall. This could mean freedom of mobility for East Germans or could mean tighter regulation creating a virtual wall rather than a physical one. This solution is quite flexible and can achieve many things, such as full demilitarization of East and West Germany or even greater tensions. This would be largely seen as a win for the USA.

## **Unite Berlin:**

Uniting Berlin would end all conflict between the USSR and USA, although many negotiations would need to be made. This can be done in many ways, by force, an agreement with the USA or USSR, or a treaty with the opposing side of Berlin itself.

It would solve the issues of the USSR if they got full control of Berlin as East Germans would no longer be able to flee the country and the Iron Curtain would be stronger than ever. The USA would lose all control and influence of East Germany.

If the USA were to gain control, it could spiral in many directions: the USSR could completely blockade Berlin, tensions could lower, Berlin could eventually become demilitarized, etc. It would not prevent the USSR from intervening into Berlin despite not owning any part of it due to Berlin being fully encompassed their territory.

## **Guiding Questions:**

1. To what degree will the USA have to cut negotiations to maintain diplomatic relations?
2. How important is this wall to the USSR?
3. How does this effect the reunification of Germany?
4. Will military action be needed from either side?
5. How can we minimize the effects of this crisis from the rest of the Cold War?

## **Extra Resources:**

1. <https://blogs.loc.gov/international-collections/2019/11/the-rise-and-fall-of-the-berlin-wall/>
2. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Berlin-blockade>
3. <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2011/fall/berlin>
4. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Berlin-crisis-of-1961>
5. <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/jfk-in-history/the-cold-war-in-berlin>

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