

The Day of Denial (1961)

Abstract

The Day of Denial depicts the culmination of the Berlin Crisis in August 1961, when the East German government, backed by the Soviet Union, sealed the border between East and West Berlin and began erecting barricades. These barricades, made from concrete and barbed wire, would eventually become the Berlin Wall. The film, produced by the United States Information Services (USIS) in 1961, presents the background of the crisis in the context of the Cold War, when millions of East Germans fled to West Germany via West Berlin. When the crisis escalated in the summer of 1961, East German leader Walter Ulbricht, backed by Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev, ordered the closing of the border in the night of August 12–13, 1961, to stop East Germans from fleeing to West Berlin. The footage includes images of East German police and soldiers erecting barricades from concrete and barbed wire, and scenes of East German police, soldiers, and tanks lined up at Brandenburg Gate on August 13, 1961. Willy Brandt, the Governing Mayor of West Berlin from 1957–1966, inspected the scene at the Brandenburg Gate. Bystanders—especially journalists—were pushed back from the scene and attacked with armed water trucks. The film also includes footage of East German police officer Conrad Schumann jumping across barbed wire at Berlin Bernauer Strasse on August 15, 1961 (filmed by Dieter Hoffmann). On August 16, West Berliners protested the closure of the border at a large demonstration, which ended at (West) Berlin's city hall, where Willy Brandt condemned the violation of the Four-Power Agreement. *The Day of Denial*, which combines documentary footage, commentary, and dramatic music in the tradition of government propaganda newsreels, highlights the inhumanity of the Berlin Wall, which cut East Berliners off from friends, families, and jobs in the West.

Source

Transcription

[00:00:00] This was Berlin on Sunday, August 13th, 1961.

Since the end of World War II, four million people have fled communist East Germany. Four million people out of a population of 17 million. This in itself was an indictment of the communist [00:01:00] regime, which had denied the people liberty and the right of self-determination. For most of them, the avenue of escape was Berlin.

Statistics show that the number of refugees rose sharply every time the Russian-sponsored regime threatened and imposed restrictions on the people, curtailed their freedom, and neglected their welfare. Because of solemn international agreement and the force of world opinion, these men, women, and children were able to seek asylum in West Berlin.

On August 7th, 1961, Premier Khrushchev told the world that the Soviet Union would sign a separate peace treaty with East Germany. The stream of refugees into West Berlin mounted to 2,000 a day. The Khrushchev speech indicated that the East German people would not be consulted about their future, that Germany would [00:02:00] remain divided because such was the will of the Soviet Union.

More ominously, it implied that the Soviet Union would soon assist German communist authorities in stopping the flow of refugees. Thousands of people sought what they guessed would be their last chance of escape.

This is a map of divided Germany—West and East, free and communist. And there is Berlin. In West Berlin on the days immediately following Khrushchev's speech, life seemed nearly normal. But the increased flow of refugees was becoming daily more embarrassing to Moscow and the East German regime.

On the dividing line between West and East Berlin, this was the sight that greeted Berliners on the morning of Sunday, August 13th: [00:03:00] East German police and military units were busy sealing the entire length of the city's dividing line with barricades and obstructions.

West Berliners came to see what the communists were doing. It was announced that the East German authorities had banned all travel from East to West Berlin. The refugees could no longer cross into the Western sector. It was incredible how any regime could so publicly admit its failure to hold the allegiance of its citizens.

The news spread like wildfire—East Berlin sealed off, Soviet tanks at Berlin borders. Two Russian divisions had taken up positions around the city, a show of force to discourage any popular demonstrations. At Brandenburg Gate, drilling machines cut across the thoroughfares linking East and West Berlin [00:04:00].

East German communist police and military units began massing at the Brandenburg Gate.

West Berliners led by their mayor Willy Brandt came to look over this ruthless display of force. The communists announced they would bar over 53,000 East Berliners from access to their jobs in West Berlin. There was mounting indignation; the presence of German military units in any part of Berlin was specifically forbidden by postwar agreements.

And as late as 1949, the Soviet Union had solemnly pledged that there would be no interference with the free travel of people between East and West Berlin. The city's dividing line was never recognized as an international frontier. This display of force is entirely illegal. Embarrassed by the presence of newsmen and photographers from around the world, [00:05:00] East German armored water trucks turn their power hoses especially on the photographers.

The Soviets have now made clear their determination to prevent people from fleeing the communist paradise; the troops advance to the very edge of the dividing line. Even they seem uneasy about what they have been ordered to do here in full view of the world, in full view of their fellow Germans and Berliners, who taunt them with contempt and derision.

The East German soldiers grow [00:06:00] increasingly nervous.

In 1953, it had been Russian troops who had faced the anger of the Berliners during the great uprising in East Germany. Now the soldiers of the puppet regime faced the unpleasant task. Moscow and the Warsaw Pact nations announced that the blockade of East Berlin was planned with their full backing.

A few refugees still get through in spite of the barricades and the sentries. In this dramatic picture, you see an East German soldier waiting for the moment when his comrades fail in their vigilance to make his leap for freedom across the barricade.

In West Berlin, trade union workers march to a rally to protest the communist blockade. Citizens gathered from [00:07:00] all parts of the free city for one of the biggest mass meetings ever seen in Berlin.

Mayor Brandt receives the cheers of the huge crowd of 250,000. Speaking for them all, he says: Berlin must stand firm in the face of this new challenge. Berlin is a test for free man everywhere.

At Potsdamer Platz—another landmark of divided Berlin—communist units build a concrete wall. Visitors

from Asia see how the East German authorities compete this unique construction project. Concrete blocks that could build homes for the people are used to imprison the people of East Berlin. Communists, who [00:08:00] preach coexistence, here spend treasure and energy to separate people, people of the same nation, of the same city.

In Berlin, communists who say they support self-determination for all nations deny it to the East German people. The fact is that there is nothing but contempt for people's right to self-expression.

Guardians of the communist order are deaf to the pleas of this woman, begging to be allowed to cross into West Berlin. [00:09:00]

The real tragedy of East Berlin is written in the faces of human beings who are denied the freedom to choose, to think, to speak, to cross from one part of a city to another to claim their country as their own. This is the new colonialism of the 20th century.

Source: *The Day of Denial*. The film depicts the August 1961 travel ban between East and West Berlin and shows the building of barricades that would eventually become the Berlin Wall.

United States: United States Information Services, 1961. MacDonald (J. Fred and Leslie W.) Collection. Library of Congress. Available online at: <https://www.loc.gov/item/2020600731/>

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