

## The History of the Berlin Wall

In the final days of World War 2, the Nazi's German Reich was collapsing in on itself from all sides. The Red Army crushed in from the east and a combined allied force was quickly advancing from the west and south. On April 1, 1945 the Soviet Union reached the city of Berlin, the historic German capitol. They wasted no time engulfing the city in a horrific level of suffering and destruction, catastrophic retribution for the similar egregious acts of total war that the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe had endured in the previous years of the war against the Nazi Regime. As the dust settled and the city of Berlin lay in total and utter ruin the remaining leadership of the German Government surrendered and ended the most tragically horrifying fighting Europe had ever seen. Adolf Hitler and a handful of high ranking Nazis had taken their own lives to avoid punishment for their actions, but many others in Germany had collaborated or been Nazis, not the whole population, but many. The occupying powers in Germany held very little sympathy for the German people, allowing their soldiers to commit egregious acts against citizens. Red Army and US soldiers alike abused and raped the populations of Germany during combat operations and in the subsequent years of occupation in horrifying and traumatizing retaliation for the war. Entire cities had been leveled, with millions of homes and thousands of factories destroyed. The Allies were left to administer and find a role for over 1.5 million German POWs, 1 million more wounded German soldiers, and millions of refugees/displaced peoples in Germany<sup>1</sup>. Through early occupation years the German people often did not receive sufficient or any food rations from the allies. In the postwar period aid was stretched thin across a devastated Europe, and food was often diverted to countries who were victims of the Nazis, not to the German people who were blamed for the war<sup>2</sup>.

After German surrender, the Allies met at the Potsdam Conference<sup>3</sup> in July of 1945 to determine the fate of postwar Germany. Germany would be stripped of all of its annexations during the war and a large amount of its former territory. Germans who lived in these territories were displaced and forced to move into the new German boundaries. Additionally this new Germany was to be divided into occupation zones from which each major ally (France, The United Kingdom, The United States of America, And the Soviet Union) could administer after the war. France, The UK, and The US administered the zones that made up the western and

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<sup>1</sup> Knowles, Chris. "Germany 1945-1949: A Case Study in Post-Conflict Reconstruction - Uol History and Policy." *Uol History and Policy*, 14 Feb. 2025, [historyandpolicy.org/policy-papers/papers/germany-1945-1949-a-case-study-in-post-conflict-reconstruction/](https://historyandpolicy.org/policy-papers/papers/germany-1945-1949-a-case-study-in-post-conflict-reconstruction/).

<sup>2</sup> "Aspect of History, When Germany Was Divided into Two Separate States." *Wikipedia.org*, Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., 5 July 2003, [en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_Germany\\_%281945%E2%80%931990%29](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Germany_%281945%E2%80%931990%29). Accessed 25 Aug. 2025.

<sup>3</sup> "Potsdam Conference." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 29 July 2025, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Potsdam\\_Conference#Germany](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Potsdam_Conference#Germany).

southern regions of Germany, whilst the Soviet Union controlled the eastern portion of the nation. Berlin, as the German capital and center for allied command, was also divided into four separate administrative zones between the powers, despite being fully encapsulated inside the greater Soviet controlled eastern zone.

Tensions quickly arose between the occupying powers in Germany. There was always distrust between the Soviet Union and the western nations, the conflicting ideologies of these nations, Capitalism vs Communism, gave way for natural rivalry and suspicion. This paranoia had only been exemplified by the war. The western nations were ultimately distrustful that the Soviet Union, and Joseph Stalin specifically, had been in cooperation with Adolph Hitler due to the Molotov and Ribbentrop Pact outlining non aggression between the two during the early days of the war. Additionally the Soviet Union was distrustful of the west, and vice versa, due to disagreements on military strategy during the war. Stalin often accused the west of waiting until the last moment to open a second front of the war in France to severely weaken the Communists in Europe in order to control the postwar continent<sup>4</sup>. As the war came to a close, allied powers, but especially the Soviet Union, had raided German industry of machinery, infrastructure, and goods, shipping them to their homelands to stimulate economies that had been ravaged. This destroyed what little was left of an already desecrated German industrial base and left little way for a rebuilding Germany to ever sustain itself. How to go about reconstructing Germany quickly became a point of contention between the Allies. The United States would heavily support rebuilding Germany's industrial base and infrastructure to benefit Europe as a whole. This was part of the overarching US Marshall Plan to fund reconstruction in Western Europe, and soon after this plan went into motion France and the UK too joined this plan to reconstruct Germany. The Soviet Union, in opposition, did not implement these plans, and instead continued to extract reparations from East Germany. The Soviet Union, and especially Stalin, sought to maintain a weak and Soviet controlled Germany to prevent a threat like the Nazis from ever emerging again. Across Eastern Europe the Soviet Union pursued propping up communist regimes as a measure of security both from these countries, and from the western powers they viewed as hostile. This conflict of policy across postwar Europe would prove to be the point of no return for the Cold War. The western allies had always assumed the division of Germany, agreed upon at the Potsdam Conference, would be a temporary measure until a new German Government could be established. The Soviet Union made it clear they would not be withdrawing from East Germany or supporting reunification. In response to this, on May 23rd, 1949, France, The UK, and the United States officially combined their occupation zones into a new German government, the Federal Republic of Germany, or West Germany for short<sup>5</sup>. Shortly thereafter, on October 7th, 1949, The Soviet Union propped up an East German government, the German Democratic

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<sup>4</sup> . "Origins of the Cold War." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 5 July 2025, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Origins\\_of\\_the\\_Cold\\_War#Interwar\\_diplomacy\\_%281918%E2%80%931939%29](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Origins_of_the_Cold_War#Interwar_diplomacy_%281918%E2%80%931939%29).

<sup>5</sup> "West Germany Is Established | EBSCO." *EBSCO Information Services, Inc.* | [Wwww.ebsco.com](https://www.ebsco.com), 2023, [www.ebsco.com/research-starters/history/west-germany-established](https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/history/west-germany-established).

Republic, which was immensely controlled by Soviet authorities. Berlin, the historic capital of Germany, would create a west German exclave, still divided between communism and capitalism, despite being in the heart of east German Territory.

Within West Berlin the Allies' Marshall plan gradually took effect, improving West German's standard of living. West Germany's economy would continue to improve through the early 1970s. The political structure of west Germany was a democratic one, established by the allied powers, but with multiple competing parties independent from The US or UK, such as the Social Democratic Party and the Christian Democratic Union, to name the largest of the parties. Unlike West Germany, East Germany had poorly recovered from the war. Paying Soviet reparations and having their industries extracted to the Soviet Union left East Germany with a weakened economy and impoverished population by the mid 1950s. Conversely West Germany at this point had near total employment of their population and actively sought immigrant workers. East Germany's politics, too, were very heavily influenced by the Soviet Union, and the ruling party of East Germany was formed through Soviet direction. In East Germany noncommunist parties had their influence nullified by being merged into large coalitions of communist parties. Noncommunist parties were compensated for their existence in order to maintain the illusion of fair democracy in East Germany. The lack of opportunity and political persecution in East Germany became a serious problem for the country, as through the 1950s well educated German workers and families began to rapidly flee the country to the West, so that, by 1961, nearly 3 million East Germans had left the country. This was a problem for the East German government, the amount of citizens leaving caused a phenomenon called "Brain Drain"<sup>6</sup>, which is a term that means well educated people leave an area en masse so that there is a shortage of skilled workers to fill important roles in society. Because the people who left for the West were often some of East Germany's most skilled workers, their absence was causing huge economic damage to the country. Across the Eastern Block the Soviet Union had already emplaced systems of limited travel for citizens, and this included East Germany, whose citizens needed passes to enter and exit the country. Stalin and the East German leadership went a step farther though, and in 1952 agreed to close the Inner German Border, and erected a barbed wire fence between the two Germanys. These measures increased tensions between the two Governments, but was overall ineffective in stifling the flow of the exodus. Although the Inner German Border had been fenced off, the city of Berlin remained undivided by any physical barrier, and East and West Berliners traveled freely across the city. The City became a loophole for many East Germans escaping the country. An East German citizen could travel to East Berlin, and pass into West Berlin without being stopped, and then from there finding transportation to West Germany as a whole. The City of Berlin became the main means of escape for East Germans, and millions flooded through the city to escape the east. The city of Berlin not only served as a means of escape for East Germany's populace, but also as an unfavorable comparison between capitalism and communism. The proximity of the two systems inside the

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<sup>6</sup> . "Human Capital Flight." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 28 Apr. 2019, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human\\_capital\\_flight](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_capital_flight).

city of Berlin, capitalism in the west and communism in the east, highlighted communism's failures to innovate technologically and provide for its people. The East German Government and Soviet Union came to the conclusion that the open border in Berlin had to come to an end, so on August 13th, 1961, the East German Government began construction of the Berlin wall. Cutting directly through the streets of Berlin, the wall divided not only the city, but also family members and friends from one another. Where an arbitrary line had once stood dividing the city of Berlin invisibly, there now stood a 12 foot tall concrete barrier. The East German and Soviet Governments would continue to upgrade and reinforce the wall through the coming decades, going on to add barbed wire, guard towers, and a second 'inner wall' that would create a 100 meter wide no man's land in between the cities.

In terms of its immediate goals, the Berlin wall was successful, it stopped the flow of migrants out of east Germany, on the other hand, the wall was yet another point of tension between the Western and Eastern Blocks as whole. In October of 1961 there would be a dispute between the west and east at the wall, known as the Berlin Crisis of 1961<sup>7</sup>, which would see the United States and Soviet Union standoff with tanks positioned along the wall, and risked starting a war between the two powers in Germany. Although the wall's construction was a point of disagreement between East and West, it did finally subdue concerns that the Eastern Block would take west Berlin by force<sup>8</sup>. The wall represented a physical separation of East and West Berlin, demarcating and effectively recognizing West Berlin's right to exist inside of East Germany. As US president John F. Kennedy would admit, "A wall is a hell of a lot better than a war."

Tensions between the Eastern and Western Blocks would ease in the coming decades, as the two sides reproached with each other. In the Transit Agreement of 1972 it was agreed that west Berliners would be allowed to visit east Berlin and East Germany. In December the same year the Basic Treaty<sup>9</sup> was signed, outlining that for the first time in their short history the two German governments would recognize the sovereignty of the other. These treaties were monumental in normalizing relations between the two countries, and gave hope that future efforts for reunification could be peaceful and collaborative. However with the border between East and West Germany still being patrolled by guards the country is as far from being unified as ever. With a wall carving right through the city of Berlin, separating two governments, fundamentally different to one another, monumental work is still needed to be done if Germany is to be unified once again. It is up to the most powerful people in our government, the people behind the scenes to make progress towards bringing peace and security to Germany. Just as

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<sup>7</sup> Office of the Historian. "Milestones: 1953–1960 - Office of the Historian." *State.gov*, 2024, [history.state.gov/milestones/1953-1960/berlin-crisis](https://history.state.gov/milestones/1953-1960/berlin-crisis).

<sup>8</sup> History.com Editors. "Berlin Wall | HISTORY , Dates & the Fall | HISTORY." *HISTORY*, 15 Dec. 2009, [www.history.com/articles/berlin-wall](https://www.history.com/articles/berlin-wall).

<sup>9</sup> Wikipedia Contributors. "Basic Treaty." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 2 July 2011, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Basic\\_Treaty\\_1972](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Basic_Treaty_1972).

important, though, are the everyday people of Germany, East and West, who have the strength and numbers to rise up for freedom, for democracy.

## Rooting Out East Germany's Communist Threat

Even before the Berlin Wall stood, Berlin represented the epitome of tension between not just East Germany and West Germany, but between communism and capitalism. These tensions resulted in both sides participating in espionage, so much that Berlin was referred to as the “Capital of Spies.”<sup>10</sup>

Both East Germany and West Germany had intelligence agencies. Known as the Stasi, the intelligence agency of East Germany was feared for its ruthlessness both in domestic and international surveillance. There were instances where the Stasi kidnapped East German officials who had escaped to West Germany, brought them back to East Germany, and executed them. The Stasi also aided terrorist groups, such as the Red Army Faction (RAF), in their attempts to attack West Berlin<sup>11</sup>, especially in the 1970s. Also, the Stasi converted many lower-level West German spies sent to East Germany to falsely report information back to the BND as part of their counterintelligence operations<sup>12</sup>.

Conversely, the intelligence agency of West Germany and the current agency of the reunified Germany is the BND. During the 1960s before the construction of the Berlin Wall, the BND gathered an immense amount of information about East German life, everything from the number of beds in hospitals to the size of East German airfields. However, the East Germans quickly retaliated against the West Germans' covert operations and turned many of the informants into double agents for the Stasi. After the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961, the espionage of the BND greatly decreased in effectiveness. Still though, the foreign intelligence operations of the BND proved helpful in some instances. In 1962, the BND was the first intelligence agency to learn about the Soviet Union's intention to construct weapons on Cuba, known as the Cuban Missile Crisis, which strengthened West Germany's relationship with the United States. The BND also received information about other Soviet Union operations in Eastern Europe. However, the BND also had many faults. Under the leadership of Reinhard Gehlen, who was later released from the organization in 1968, the BND hired many people who

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<sup>10</sup>“The Capital of Spies in Cold War Berlin | German Spy Museum Berlin.” *Deutsches Spionagemuseum*, 2016, [www.deutsches-spionagemuseum.de/en/espionage/capital-of-espionage](http://www.deutsches-spionagemuseum.de/en/espionage/capital-of-espionage).

<sup>11</sup> “BND German Intelligence Organization.” *Britannica*, Britannica, [www.britannica.com/topic/BND#ref127828](http://www.britannica.com/topic/BND#ref127828).

<sup>12</sup> Ault, Julia . “What Happened in East Germany? - Perspectives - College of Humanities - the University of Utah.” *Humanities.utah.edu*, 29 Oct. 2021, [humanities.utah.edu/perspectives/2020-2021/what-happened-in-east-germany.php](http://humanities.utah.edu/perspectives/2020-2021/what-happened-in-east-germany.php).

were later suspected of being Soviet spies. The BND later restructured under the leadership of its new president Gerhard Wessel<sup>13</sup>.

By 1974, the public was aware of the presence of intelligence operations in their country, especially after spies' true loyalties were uncovered. In 1974, the identity of an East German spy was revealed, sending ripples of suspicion throughout West Germany. In an event later called the Guillaume Affair<sup>14</sup>, the secretary of Chancellor Willy Brandt was exposed as an East German spy. The closeness and success of East Germany's spy to the West German government shocked the country and resulted in the resignation of Chancellor Brandt. Though the spy was alleged to have been sent to destabilize the West German government by endangering Chancellor Brandt's reputation and position as Chancellor, the head of East German intelligence, Markus Wolf, denied it.

Additionally, both sides utilized propaganda in order to cement their ideologies within their population. Schools in East Germany were intended to conform the younger generations into believing and promoting wholeheartedly the views of the Communist Party<sup>15</sup>. In these schools, children were taught that the West was bad and threatened the East and their "peaceful" way of life. Overall, though direct physical attacks weren't used by either side, subversive tactics and espionage were widespread.

Amidst all the hostility between the two states, there remains an underlying question, can Germany ever be reunited again? Is there a peaceful route to reunification with East Germany? For a long time this has been a contentious debate, especially between the leading two parties in the GDR, the Christian Democratic Union<sup>16</sup> and the Socialist Democratic Party<sup>17</sup>. The CDU generally sides closely with the United States and other western powers, focusing on competing with the Eastern Block. Meanwhile the Socialist Democratic Party prioritizes finding paths to reunification, even at the cost of posturing with the East. The SDP made progress towards rapprochement with the East in the early 1970s, but much work still needs to be made. There is still large opposition in the CDU to normalizing relations, and whether or not Germany should seek reunification at all. Choices about using propaganda or spywork against the East must always be made with consideration of the context of their effect on the relations between East and West Germany. No matter the case, West Germany must have a way to combat the threat that

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<sup>13</sup> . "Federal Intelligence Service." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 6 Aug. 2025, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federal\\_Intelligence\\_Service#History](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federal_Intelligence_Service#History).

<sup>14</sup> "Gaius Chamberlain." *HistoryofSpies.com - Your Resource for Espionage on the Web*, 19 Mar. 2015, [historyofspies.com/the-guillaume-affair/](https://historyofspies.com/the-guillaume-affair/). Accessed 1 Sept. 2025.

<sup>15</sup> Ataman, By Sheena McKenzie and Nadine Schmidt Video by Ed Kiernan and Joseph. "East German Kids Were "Taught to Lie." Then the System Came Crashing down Overnight." *CNN*, 9 Nov. 2019, [www.cnn.com/2019/11/09/europe/berlin-wall-30-years-schools-grm-intl](https://www.cnn.com/2019/11/09/europe/berlin-wall-30-years-schools-grm-intl).

<sup>16</sup> Wikipedia Contributors. "Christian Democratic Union of Germany." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 1 Sept. 2025, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian\\_Democratic\\_Union\\_of\\_Germany#History](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_Democratic_Union_of_Germany#History).

<sup>17</sup> "Social Democratic Party of Germany." *Wikipedia*, 31 July 2020, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social\\_Democratic\\_Party\\_of\\_Germany](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_Democratic_Party_of_Germany).

East Germany and its communist system poses, whether this be peaceful, covert, or outright, something must be done<sup>181920</sup>.

### **Guiding Questions:**

What is your person's position on how West Germany should react to East Germany's espionage attempts?

Should espionage be abandoned or continued?

How can West Germany root out East German spies already present in West Germany?

How can we assure the public of the stability of our government?

Should propaganda be used, and if so, how?

Is there a peaceful route to reunification?

## **Assisting Easterners**

For regular civilians in East Germany, every day was plagued with fear. East Germany was a dictatorship in which media and other rights were strictly restricted. People living in East Germany were indoctrinated through propaganda, the education system, and limited travel to other communist or socialist countries. The Stasi, the East German Intelligence agency, made frequent arrests and citizens were often encouraged to report people they suspected to support the West. While this contributed to an environment of distrust, many East Germans found solace in tight communities where they could feel protected from prying ears. It was often among these small groups that plans to escape East Germany would take shape<sup>21</sup>.

Though escaping posed deadly risks, many East Germans attempted to cross the Berlin Wall and seek refugee status in West Germany. Before the Berlin Wall was revitalized with barbed wire and other restrictions, up to 1,700 East Germans were crossing into West Germany.

Even after the barriers grew, Easterners found other ways to escape into West Germany, such as using buildings that overlooked the wall to cross the physical boundary. West Germany

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<sup>18</sup> JFK Library. "The Cold War in Berlin | JFK Library." *Jfklibrary.org*, 7 Nov. 2024, [www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/jfk-in-history/the-cold-war-in-berlin](http://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/jfk-in-history/the-cold-war-in-berlin).

<sup>19</sup> "History of Germany 1945-1990." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, [en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_Germany\\_\(1945-1990\)](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Germany_(1945-1990)).

<sup>20</sup> Office of the Historian. "Milestones: 1989-1992 - Office of the Historian." *State.gov*, 2019, [history.state.gov/milestones/1989-1992/fall-of-communism](https://history.state.gov/milestones/1989-1992/fall-of-communism).

<sup>21</sup> Ataman, By Sheena McKenzie and Nadine Schmidt Video by Ed Kiernan and Joseph. "East German Kids Were "Taught to Lie." Then the System Came Crashing down Overnight." *CNN*, 9 Nov. 2019, [www.cnn.com/2019/11/09/europe/berlin-wall-30-years-schools-grm-intl](http://www.cnn.com/2019/11/09/europe/berlin-wall-30-years-schools-grm-intl).

assisted these attempts by standing on the other side of the wall and aiding people as they crossed. This strategy was quickly snuffed out, and East German officials forced citizens to move or seal the exits.

Later, the “No Man’s Land” strip between the two barriers that composed the Berlin Wall was constructed and often had military patrols to stop defectors from escaping into West Berlin. Even with these increased risks, many East Germans still tried to escape. Some utilized steam trains, ziplines, tightropes, and airplanes, and others still created tunnel systems to pass<sup>22</sup>; the latter of which was shut down by the Stasi after over 80 people had escaped. Upon reaching West Berlin, escapees would claim refugee status, and under 1953 Federal Expellee Law<sup>23</sup> would be allowed to claim citizenship in West Germany<sup>24</sup>. West Germany claims that it is the sole sovereign body for representing the German people, and for that reason it claims representation for the people of East Germany, despite having no control over the East German Government.

West Germany, both the government and the civilians, assisted those in East Germany in escaping and surviving their everyday lives. West Germans on the individual level would send Care Packages to those in the east, often containing treats or other supplies, such as coffee. However, the support was stifled after the East German government restricted the amount of parcels East Germans could receive, along with limiting the type of items that could be sent. In the face of food shortages in the East, West Germans continued to provide humanitarian aid in the few ways they could<sup>25</sup>.

On a larger scale, the West Germany government also assisted East Germans who wanted to live in West Germany. In a practice called *Häftlingsfreikauf* (“Prisoners’ ransom”) West Germany would pay East Germany for the transfer of people who had been imprisoned for political reasons to West Germany<sup>26</sup>. These political prisoners had the choice to move to West Germany from prison; however, they didn’t have the chance to cut ties or say goodbye to others. By this program’s end in October 1989, around 33,755 East German political prisoners were released to West Germany. Aside from political prisoners, West Germany helped secure 250,000 exit visas for East Germans who wanted to immigrate to West Germany. East Germany was

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<sup>22</sup> Blakemore, Erin. “All the Ways People Escaped across the Berlin Wall | HISTORY.” *HISTORY*, 8 Nov. 2019, [www.history.com/articles/berlin-wall-crossings-east-germany](http://www.history.com/articles/berlin-wall-crossings-east-germany).

<sup>23</sup> Wikipedia Contributors. “Federal Expellee Law.” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 6 Aug. 2025, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federal\\_Expellee\\_Law](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federal_Expellee_Law).

<sup>24</sup> . “Republikflucht.” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 5 Apr. 2025, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Republikflucht](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Republikflucht).

<sup>25</sup> Shereck, Sabine. “Parcels of CARE.” *BBC*, 18 Dec. 2021, [www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/w3ct2zvj](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/w3ct2zvj).

<sup>26</sup> Wikipedia Contributors. “Trading of East German Political Prisoners.” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 16 Dec. 2024, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trading\\_of\\_East\\_German\\_political\\_prisoners](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trading_of_East_German_political_prisoners).

incentivized to support these practices because the payment from West Germany would help East Germany through the state of financial crisis they had been in since the early 1970s.

It is the government of West Germany's responsibility to take care of the needs of its citizens, and it has been claimed time and time again by West Germany that it has authority over the entire German body; Accordingly, it is the West German Government's responsibility to make a decision on how best to help the people of East Germany, or if to help them at all. Furthermore, they must weigh the consequences and benefits of helping East Germans. If the GDR does help them, could that be a political or propaganda victory? Could East German refugees serve as valuable informants, or have valuable skills to the GDR? Either way, a structured approach to the question of East German Refugees is imperative to defining West Germany's position in the cold war as a whole.

**Guiding Questions:**

Should West Germany continue to help Easterners?

Should the West German Government continue to support the East through ransom payments?

Could helping East German Refugees prove to be politically or strategically advantageous?

Are there risks associated with helping or not helping refugees?