

**Bitter Measures:
Intelligence and Action in the Berlin Crisis, 1961**

**Dr. Donald P. Steury
Central Intelligence Agency**

“All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the official positions or views of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) or any other US Government agency. Nothing in the contents should be construed as asserting or implying US Government authentication of information or CIA endorsement of the author’s views. This material has been reviewed by CIA to prevent the disclosure of classified information.”

Just after midnight on the morning of 13 August 1961, East German soldiers pulled up in trucks at numerous locations in the center of Berlin. Working quickly, they pulled out rolls of barbed wire and, within a few hours, had established a barrier clean across the center of the city. Guards were posted every few yards, as necessary, and, within a matter of hours Berlin was cut in two. The Berlin Wall had come into being.

Looking back, it is possible to see this as the turning point in the Cold War. No nation, no system, which can survive only by walling in its citizens can possibly hope to achieve credibility or permanency. The building of the Berlin Wall ensured that the German Democratic Republic would last only so long as the Wall remained. Its construction was an admission of defeat by the communist leadership. Once built, it was doomed, sooner or later, to come down.

It did not seem so at the time. The Berlin Wall was built in a period of soaring tension between the US and the USSR. It was the climax of nearly three years of crisis, precipitated in November 1958, when Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev threatened to sign a separate peace treaty with communist East Germany, thereby putting an end to the four-power regime in the city. In the end, no such treaty was ever signed and Khrushchev moderated his tone over 1959, even taking time off from the Cold War to engage in a triumphal tour of the United States. But, in May 1960, he walked out of the Paris summit, following the shoot-down of Francis Gary Powers’ U-2, and later that year conducted a stormy appearance at the United Nations, which produced his famous shoe-pounding episode. The specter of a peace treaty was raised again and Soviet-American tensions increased even as Khrushchev prepared to deal with the newly-elected President, John Fitzgerald Kennedy.

What was at stake, of course, were western rights to station troops in Berlin and maintain the freedom and independence of the western half of the city. These derived from four-power agreements negotiated at the end of World War II. Although a separate Soviet-GDR peace treaty might conceivably be little more than a political gesture, there was little doubt that, once having signed such an agreement, Khrushchev

would use it as a lever to force the western allies, and especially the United States, out of Berlin.

Quite apart from the humanitarian cost of abandoning another million or so people to communist domination, this would have been catastrophic politically: Berlin was the symbol of America's commitment to the North Atlantic alliance, to the security of Western Europe, to the sovereignty of the Federal Republic. To abandon Berlin would be to make mockery of the commitments negotiated since the end of the war.

But Berlin was indefensible. The Soviet bloc might not actually be expected to take West Berlin by force, but, a determined Soviet effort to isolate the western half of the city could only be met by evacuation, by hunkering down for a siege, or by efforts to force troops through to the city from West Germany. All of these actions carried with them the risk of war. There was a general fear that a military confrontation over Berlin would quickly escalate into general hostilities, in an era in which both sides were prepared to wage war with nuclear weapons. A crisis over Berlin, if it got out of control, could lead to Armageddon.

CIA analysts thus took very seriously any apparent attempts to undermine western treaty rights in Berlin. At the same time, it was believed that Moscow would make strenuous efforts to negotiate before carrying out Khrushchev's threats. Whatever the validity of this conclusion, it was, in a sense misleading. Since any negotiation along lines acceptable to the Soviets inevitably would involve compromising western treaty rights, no negotiated solution was really possible. The Berlin crisis thus took the form of a series of threatened ultimata, which never quite came off, with western observers attempting to anticipate Soviet actions that were never taken.

But, although treaty issues often were at center stage, the dynamic factor in the Berlin situation was the refugee problem. So long as the sector border between East and West Berlin was open, West Berlin acted as an open conduit to the West. Moreover, its growing prosperity stood in sharp contrast to the drabness of life in the Soviet bloc. The result was that through Berlin, East Germany was depopulating itself at the rate of 200-300,000 people per year, more than 1.1 million since the founding of the communist state in 1949—and this from what was, after all, a small country with a population of fewer than 16 million.¹ In the summer of 1961, Khrushchev joked with the East German leader, Walter Ulbricht, that soon he would be the only person left in the country. Ulbricht was not amused.

Small wonder that the East German's relations with Khrushchev seem to have been dominated by increasingly frantic attempts to reach agreement on some drastic

¹ *Current Weekly Intelligence Summary*: "Flight of Refugees from East Germany," 12 February 1959 (MORI: 45580) in Donald P. Steury (ed.), *On the Front Lines of the Cold War: Documents on the Intelligence War in Berlin, 1946-1961* (Washington, D.C. CIA History Staff, Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1999) p. 455-58.

measure to keep the population of East Germany from simply walking away down the Friedrichstraße. The importance of this has often been underestimated in western scholarship, which for years focused on Khrushchev and his policies. Thanks to the work of Hope Harrison we now know that the Wall was almost wholly an East German project, from beginning to end. Ulbricht was an unrepentant Stalinist and the East German regime the most hard-line communist in Eastern Europe. Their persistent efforts to reconstruct the East German economy along Stalinist lines caused widespread hardship and directly fed the outflux of refugees.

In the American intelligence community, the importance of what was termed the “refugee problem” as a destabilizing factor in the Berlin situation was recognized early on. The greatest concern was that East Berlin’s inability to resolve the economic crisis they largely had created would undermine Khrushchev’s political standing inside the Kremlin and force him into some kind of precipitate action. This concern grew as Khrushchev stepped up his pressure on the West: increased tensions worked directly to increase the flow of refugees, which in turn, fed the growing economic crisis in East Germany, thereby increasing pressure on Khrushchev to force through some kind of solution—and so on, in an escalating spiral of tension with increasingly dire consequences.

The possibility of some sort of Soviet action to restrict access to West Berlin—either as a repetition of the 1948 blockade, or as some other form of action—figured strongly in intelligence reporting throughout the last half of the 1950s. In November 1957, CIA’s Office of Current Intelligence (OCI) warned that the Soviets might seal the sector borders between East and West Berlin as a means of applying pressure on the West.² On 28 May 1959, OCI warned that East Germany—not the Soviet Union—might restrict traffic at the border crossings, to reduce or eliminate uncontrolled access to West Berlin, force the West Berlin government to negotiate on issues of access, and reduce the labor shortage in East Germany.³

Nonetheless, the Berlin crisis, when it came, was something of surprise. The mid-1950s had been a period of relative quiet in Berlin. Although it was taken for granted that Soviet long-term goals were to force the western allies out of the city, it was assumed that they were not willing to risk war and accepted a western presence for the time being.⁴ It was known that the Soviets believed that long-term political and economic trends favored them. Moreover, as their nuclear capabilities improved, the

² *Memorandum for the DDJ*; Subject: “The Berlin Situation,” 1 November 1957 (MORI: 44001 in *Ibid.*, pp. 536-37.

³ *Current Weekly Intelligence Summary*: “East Germany May Move against East German Sector Border Crossings,” 28 May 1959; *Ibid.*, pp. 493-94.

⁴ NIE 11-3-56 *Probable Short-Term Communist Capabilities and Intentions Regarding Berlin*; 28 February 1956, pp. 1-3. (www.FOIA.CIA.gov).

Soviets would be more confident in their dealings with the West—and would be more willing to force their demands.⁵

Khrushchev's November 1958 pronouncement thus was seen as a sign that a period of Soviet resurgence was beginning. The intervening two years had seen considerable expansion of the Soviet long-range bomber force, deployment of large numbers of medium- and intermediate-range ballistic missiles in Eastern Europe and significant progress in their ICBM program. This did not mean that the Soviets would deliberately provoke a military confrontation, but that they were determined to force a discussion of the Berlin situation and that they would not back down. An NIE issued immediately after Khrushchev's November pronouncement forecast that the Soviets would seek a summit at a time and place of their own choosing, preferably under circumstances in which they had some hopes of splitting the western alliance.⁶

Another SNIE, issued two months later noted that the Soviets believed that their advances in nuclear weapons had considerably improved their negotiating position.⁷ If the western powers refused to recognize the de facto position in Central Europe, another blockade of Berlin was possible. Analysts believed that, in contrast to 1948, the Soviets would not permit the resupply of the city, but they would allow supplies to be carried to the western garrisons. Western attempts to force open access to the city would be opposed, but the Soviets would otherwise avoid a military confrontation.⁸

DECIPHERING SOVIET INTENTIONS

NIEs issued over the next two years amplified, did not back away from these conclusions.⁹ Analysts nonetheless found Khrushchev's intentions and actions difficult to predict. Tensions remained high, but, given the uncompromising nature of his demands, Khrushchev was remarkably quiescent during the Berlin crisis as a whole. The caution he demonstrated often contrasted puzzlingly with his habitual bombast. In January 1959, Khrushchev sent clear signals that he would not go to war over Berlin, but also that he would not be part of an agreement that included the Bonn government—which then had as its Chancellor the Christian Democrat Konrad Adenauer. When the foreign ministers of the Soviet Union and the three Western Allies met in Geneva over May-June 1959, Khrushchev apparently sniffed the beginnings of a crack in the Western alliance—perhaps from a KGB report that Great Britain and France were considering reducing their troop commitments to West Berlin. Yet, when the United States vetoed the idea, Khrushchev responded only with an open letter to Eisenhower. Apparently

⁵ NIE 11-4-56 *Soviet Capabilities and Probable Course of Action Through 1961*; 2 August 1956, p. 48. (www.FOIA.CIA.gov)

⁶ SNIE 100-13-58 *Soviet Objectives in the Berlin Crisis*; 23 December 1958, Steury (ed.) *op. cit.* p. 431.

⁷ SNIE 100-2-59 *Probable Soviet Course of Action Regarding Berlin and Germany*; 24 February 1959, p. 2 (www.FOIA.CIA.gov).

⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 4-5.

⁹ SNIE 100-2/1-59 *The Berlin Crisis*; 17 March 1959, *passim* (www.FOIA.CIA.gov).

eager to push for a solution at the beginning of the conference, he later was disposed to wait for a more opportune moment. "A year or a year and a half—this isn't a key issue for us," he told the East German leader, Walter Ulbricht.¹⁰ An SNIE issued during the conference concluded that Khrushchev probably did not seek a real solution there, but saw it as the first stage in a process by which the Western Allies would be eased gradually out of Berlin. "If the Soviets allow the Geneva meeting to end in stalemate, they will presumably do so on the calculation that a period of additional pressure on the Berlin problem will finally induce the Western Powers to make substantial concessions." The Soviets still would shrink from a direct confrontation, but would be more likely, "to increase pressure on the Berlin issue gradually and only in such a degree as in their opinion would tend to induce the Western Powers to resume negotiations later..."¹¹ In the meantime, Khrushchev went off to the United States, to visit President Eisenhower.

The next opportune moment came a year later, at the Paris summit. Once again, Khrushchev failed to make use of the opportunity to push the Berlin issue. Although he later claimed that he had decided there was little point in dealing with the lame duck President Eisenhower,¹² he may also have decided after a preliminary meeting with De Gaulle that there was little hope of separating Great Britain and France from the US on the Berlin question.¹³ At any rate, he showed up in Paris only to destroy the summit. Denouncing the U-2 flights over the Soviet Union (Francis Gary Powers had been shot down just two weeks previously) he demanded an apology and stormed out of the summit. An apology was not forthcoming, and the summit was at an end.

The winter of 1960-61 was one of anticipation, as well as discontent. In a review of the Berlin crisis prepared that Spring, CIA's Office of Current Intelligence observed that Khrushchev had alternated between offers to negotiate over Berlin and threats of unilateral action. Throughout, "Moscow" had, "aimed at liquidating Western rights to remain in Berlin without restrictions pending German unification." Since the West has no interest in negotiating away its rights, Moscow has used deadlines, either explicit or implicit to guarantee continuing Western interest in discussing the issue in order to avoid a crisis.

There was a clear sense, however, that some kind of decision was at hand: Moscow was still willing to negotiate, even to settle for some kind of interim agreement. However:

¹⁰ Aleksander Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *Khrushchev's Cold War* (New York and London: WW Norton, 2006), pp. 224-25.

¹¹ SNIE 100-7-59 *Soviet Tactics on Berlin*; 11 June 1959 (www.foia.cia.gov), pp. 1, 4.

¹² John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War* (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 73.

¹³ Sherman Kent, "The Summit Conference of 1960: An Intelligence Officer's View," in Donald P. Steury (ed.), *Sherman Kent and the Board of National Estimates* (Washington, D.C.: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1994), pp. 162-63.

If the West refused to negotiate, Khrushchev would probably feel compelled to conclude a separate treaty. His long and continuing commitments to take this action probably act as a form of pressure either to demonstrate gains by negotiations or to carry out his repeated pledges to resolve the situation in Berlin by unilateral action. At any rate, Khrushchev has committed himself to a solution during 1961.¹⁴

With the election of a new American President, the Berlin crisis came to a boil. In Khrushchev's estimation, the new administration meant a renewed opportunity for resolution of the Berlin situation. John F. Kennedy had run on a "Get Tough with the Soviets" platform, chiding Eisenhower for his supposed complacency toward the Soviet ICBM program. In fact, the supposed Soviet superiority—the so-called "missile gap"—did not exist—although the Soviet Union had more than 200 medium-range ballistic missiles positioned to strike targets throughout Western Europe,¹⁵ including, briefly, a brigade of nuclear-tipped SS-3 MRBMs deployed in East Germany.¹⁶ Khrushchev—who, of course, knew there was no "missile gap"—saw Kennedy's election strategy as evidence that he was the tool of the "militarist forces" that were the real power-brokers in American politics.¹⁷ His ill-opinion of Kennedy was reinforced by the ill-advised and ineptly-executed Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961.

Washington recognized that Khrushchev would view the upcoming Vienna summit as his next best opportunity to accomplish something on Berlin. Intelligence prepared in the run-up to the summit noted that Khrushchev was under considerable internal pressure to accomplish something positive. The Soviets believed that East Germany would never stabilize itself so long as the Western Allies remained in Berlin. Khrushchev would have to pull something out of his hat or face burgeoning opposition in the POLITBURO. Berlin was seen as *the* important issue, far outweighing—in the estimation of the Soviet leadership—even the deepening Sino-Soviet rift.¹⁸ Khrushchev "may have

¹⁴ *Current Intelligence Weekly Summary*: "Soviet Policy on Berlin and Germany," 11 May 1961 Doc. Nr. 28202) in Steury (ed.) *On the Front Lines of the Cold War*, pp. 545-46.

¹⁵ NIE 11-8/1-61 *Strength and Deployment of Soviet Long Range Ballistic Missile Forces* in: Donald P. Steury (ed.), *Intentions and Capabilities: Estimates on Soviet Strategic Forces, 1950-1983* (Washington, D.C.: CIA History Staff, 1996) pp. 135-37.

¹⁶ NIE 11-8-59 *Soviet Capabilities for Strategic Attack Through Mid-1964* in *Ibid.*, p. 79. Stationed in the vicinity of Fürstenberg and Vogelsang, north of Berlin, the missiles were in position by May 1959. They remained until that August, when they were withdrawn to Kaliningrad. The full story of Soviet MRBMs in East Germany is told in Matthias Uhl and Vladimir I. Ivkin, "'Operation Atom' the Soviet Union's Stationing of Nuclear Missiles in the German Democratic Republic, 1959," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, Issue 12/13; pp. 299-307. Unsubstantiated reports of Soviet medium-range missiles continued, however. See CIA/RR CB-60-41 "Possible SHYSTER Missile Base in East Germany," 11 August 1960 (www.foia.cia.gov).

¹⁷ Lawrence Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars: Berlin, Cuba, and Laos, and Vietnam* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) p. 55.

¹⁸ NIE 11-7-61 *Soviet Short-Term Intentions Regarding Berlin and Germany*; 25 April 1961 (www.foia.cia.gov), pp. 2-3.

come to feel that his original expectations were founded upon an underestimate of the importance which the us attaches to its position in Berlin, or, put another way, an overestimate of the ease with which he could exploit the USSR's growing military power at the bargaining table."¹⁹ The Soviets "would almost certainly not hold fast to their maximum demand for a peace treaty," but adopt a gradualist approach, concentrating on getting an interim agreement of the kind outlined at Geneva in 1959.²⁰ However, should negotiations break down, the Soviets' most likely course of action would be "to summon a Bloc-sponsored peace conference and eventually sign its long-threatened separate peace treaty with the GDR. They then would transfer control over Allied access to the East Germans, allowing them to harass and undermine the Allied position in West Berlin."²¹

Khrushchev himself confirmed this analysis about a month later, in a conversation with Llewellyn E. Thompson, the us Ambassador to Moscow.²² Khrushchev's declared purpose in raising the issue with Thompson was to "convey to Washington a forceful restatement of his views on Berlin and Germany, using strong language which he would not wish to employ in his initial meeting with President Kennedy." Berlin, he noted, was the "problem of problems."²³ He expected it to be the main topic for discussion when he met with President Kennedy in Vienna.²⁴ Holding out the carrot of promised future disarmament talks, he waved the stick of a separate peace treaty, making it clear that, afterwards, "the West will not have free access without coming to terms with the East German regime."²⁵ Although he once again made reference to a gradualist, interim agreement, he left no doubt that failure to arrive at some sort of conclusion would prompt him to sign his long-threatened peace treaty, "despite the high risks which he acknowledges may be involved in such a step."²⁶

Khrushchev's remarks to Thompson were foreshadowed in a briefing prepared for the DCI earlier in the month: Khrushchev, it was reported, had a "high degree of confidence...that the tide of international affairs is running irrevocably in favor of the Communist world and that the West has no choice but to adjust to what Khrushchev sees as the new balance of power."²⁷

Berlin is still [the] crucial problem for Khrushchev, and his overall future course will depend on the outcome of his efforts to resolve the problem this year.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.4.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 1, 4.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

²² Current Intelligence Memorandum, "Khrushchev's Conversation with Ambassador Thompson on Berlin," 25 May 1961 US National Archives, CIA Records Search Tool (hereinafter, CREST), CIA-RDP79S000500010009-5.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

²⁷ DCI Briefing, Soviet Foreign Policy, 22 May 1961; CREST, CIA-RDP64B00346R000500080001-2, p. 1-1a.

...We feel it is likely that if negotiations do not take place or fail, Khrushchev will proceed with his plan to sign a separate peace treaty and transfer all control over Soviet military traffic to the East Germans.²⁸

The final judgment of the intelligence community was pronounced just before the Vienna summit, in a statement by the us Intelligence Board (usIB). Reiterating the judgments reached over the past few months with respect to Khrushchev's projected actions, the usIB warned that Khrushchev probably was caught between a rock and a hard-place:

...While Khrushchev's remarks undoubtedly serve the Soviet Premier's tactical purposes in preparing for his talks with the President, they also point up his basic dilemma. On the one hand, Khrushchev's long-standing and repeated commitments to sign a separate peace treaty if he fails to obtain satisfaction from the West probably acts (sic.) as a form of pressure on the Soviet leader. On the other hand, despite Khrushchev's repeated expressions of skepticism regarding the West's willingness to resort to war over Berlin, his actions during the past two and one-half years suggest he is not sufficiently certain what the Western response in a crisis would be and that he still prefers a negotiated solution.

All intelligence thus pointed to Soviet determination to resolve the Berlin question in 1961. It also seemed clear that Khrushchev still held out some hopes for a negotiated solution and it was at Vienna that he expected the negotiations to occur. These conclusions were founded in long analysis of Khrushchev's attitudes towards Berlin, as well as in unambiguous statements made by the Soviet leader himself.

Kennedy thus had every reason to expect some sort of dialogue on Berlin. But there was none; instead, Khrushchev opted to bully the American President, possibly in the belief that no conclusion was possible in Vienna, or at all, until the "militarist forces" in Washington had decided to act. On the first day, Kennedy was treated to one of Khrushchev's rampages. The Soviet leader reiterated his ultimatum of 1958. Although he promised a negotiated settlement that left the us a nominal force in West Berlin, he made it clear that a peace treaty would be signed by the end of the year and that it would mean the end of us treaty rights in Berlin. "It will be a cold winter," said Kennedy.²⁹

PREPARING FOR THE WORST

Back in Washington, Kennedy and his advisors began planning for the inevitable Soviet attempt to push the western allies out of West Berlin. The atmosphere was

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

²⁹ Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War: From Stalin to Khrushchev* (Cambridge MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1996) pp. 247-48.

confrontational. Former Secretary of State, Dean Acheson—JFK’s foreign policy advisor—counseled toughness.³⁰ On 30 June, National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy tasked the DCI and Secretary of State to advise on preparations to foment “progressively increasing instability in East Germany and Eastern Europe...”³¹ The response was not encouraging: Soviet bloc security was too tight, the experience of the “rollback” strategy pursued in the late 1940s had demonstrated the difficulty of effective covert action behind the Iron Curtain.³²

Ominously, on 12 July, US Ambassador in Bonn Walter Dowling cabled a warning that the “refugee flow may increase to an actual flood”, prompting the Soviets to take “additional, harsher restrictive measures.” Dowling concluded that the United States could not remain on the sidelines if this happened, as it had on 17 June 1953 (when East German workers had risen up against the communist regime and had been bloodily repressed by Soviet tanks). Such inaction would “mean the end of our prestige and influence in West Germany.”³³ To this, Washington could only reply that, “if the GDR tightens the controls between the Soviet zone and East Berlin, there is not much the United States could do.”

At the same time, a series of Special National Intelligence Estimates (SNIES) was commissioned to consider Soviet responses to a variety of NATO initiatives to preserve or restore western access to West Berlin, including direct military action.³⁴ The analysis in the SNIES revealed the complexity of the situation. It was anticipated that the Soviets would avoid a direct confrontation or a repetition of the 1948 blockade. Rather, they would implement a series of restrictive measures at the crossing points, the cumulative effect of which would be the virtual exclusion of allied access. The intent would be to make it difficult for the United States to claim that its rights had been unambiguously violated. Although NATO was expected to respond to effective us leadership, under these circumstances support for effective action to restore western rights in Berlin was expected to be limited.

The intelligence provided to Kennedy thus defined an increasingly unstable situation in which he had very little room to maneuver. His response was to focus on the core issues confronting the western alliance in Berlin, while holding open the possibility for further negotiation. This was in line with his attitude toward negotiations in general.

³⁰ FRUS, 1961-63; Vol. 14, *The Berlin Crisis, 1961-1962*; pp. 138-39, from David E. Murphy, Sergei A. Kondrashev and George Bailey *Battleground Berlin: CIA vs. KGB in the Cold War* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997) p. 363.

³¹ FRUS, 1961-63; Vol. 14, *The Berlin Crisis, 1961-1962*; pp. 162-65.

³² Murphy, *et al. op. cit.*, p. 366.

³³ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 368.

³⁴ These include the following: SNIE 2-61 *Soviet and Other Reactions to Various Courses of Action Regarding Berlin*, 13 June 1961 (MORI: 637484); SNIE 2-2-61 *Soviet and Other Reactions to Possible us Courses of Action with Respect to Berlin*, 11 July 1961 (MORI: 12252); SNIE 2-3-61 *Probable Soviet Reaction to a Western Embargo*, 18 July 1961 (MORI: 637485); SNIE 12-4-61 *Stability of East Germany in a Berlin Crisis*, 12 July 1961 (MORI: 97482) (all, www.foia.cia.gov).

Although notoriously keen to demonstrate resolve, he was always careful to provide an honorable alternative for the other side. He was most concerned to avoid a situation where a crisis might escalate out of control. He therefore went to great lengths to make sure the other side knew exactly how far he was prepared to go and what he was willing to concede. Kennedy had infuriated Khrushchev in Vienna by his repeated warnings of the effect of “miscalculations” in the nuclear age, but his concern to keep a lid on any crisis was to prove perhaps the most important element in his policy on Berlin.³⁵

On 25 July, the President used a national broadcast to clarify his position. “We cannot and will not permit the communists to drive us out of Berlin, either gradually or by force,” he declared. To that end, he called for a higher defense budget, the call up of reserves, procurement of new weapons and a step up of the civil defense program. But he also pledged “to consider any arrangement or treaty in Germany consistent with the maintenance of peace and freedom, and with the legitimate security interests of all nations.” Throughout the speech, the emphasis was on West Berlin, implying that any Soviet action that left the autonomy of that half of the city intact would not be challenged.³⁶ Kennedy thus made known his essential concern for preserving western rights and the independence of West Berlin and left it to Khrushchev to find a way to resolve the crisis in a way that met his own core interest. This was, at bottom, the stabilization of the German Democratic Republic—which meant, in essence, halting the flow of refugees to the West.

THE WALL IS BUILT

By this time, Khrushchev presumably had decided that he had reached the end of the road. Having wrung all possible advantage out of the Berlin situation, he was now seeking a graceful way to end the confrontation. According to a report by Col. Oleg Penkovsky, the CIA’s agent in Soviet military intelligence, opposition to Khrushchev in the POLITBURO was growing and support for his policy in Berlin evaporating.³⁷ Kennedy had made it clear that further demands would only escalate the crisis—which Khrushchev was not willing to do. The solution Khrushchev chose was one that had been in front of him for some time: sealing off access to West Berlin from East Germany.

The idea of a barrier or wall had originated with East German leader Walter Ulbricht, whose hard-line communist restructuring was largely responsible for the economic crisis that was driving the refugee situation. Ulbricht wanted the allies out of Berlin—which was, after all, his capital city—but most of all he wanted to staunch the hemorrhaging of skilled workers from East to West—which he believed was crippling his economy and causing his economic reforms to fail. He therefore was dodgy on the idea of a separate peace treaty between the Soviet Union and the DDR, which he believed if mishandled

³⁵ Freedman, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

³⁷ Oleg Penkovsky, Meeting Nr. 23, 28 July 1961 in Steury (ed.), *On the Front Lines of the Cold War*, pp. 520-23.

would only bring a devastating western economic embargo. In a meeting of the Warsaw Pact leaders that March, Ulbricht had proposed throwing up a barbed wire barrier to supplement tightened border controls at the crossing points between East and West Berlin. This was rejected as too provocative, but Khrushchev promised to try to negotiate something with Kennedy, while keeping a close eye on the refugee situation.³⁸

By summer, it was obvious that a separate Soviet-East German peace treaty would not be sufficient to easily drive the United States out of Berlin. Shortly after the Vienna summit, Ulbricht urged Khrushchev to call another Warsaw Pact meeting to consider the Berlin situation. The date of the meeting was set for early August. Meanwhile, urgent discussion between East Berlin and Moscow continued. East German plans for sealing off the borders were now advanced and the requisite troops were simply waiting for the go-ahead.³⁹ It seems clear that, by mid July, Khrushchev had come around to the idea of a barrier, but only as a part of a more general treaty settlement. Kennedy's 25 July speech apparently reversed that judgment: the treaty was jettisoned—or, at least put on hold—the wall would go ahead.⁴⁰ The only thing left was to ratify the decision at the Warsaw Pact meeting early in August. In Moscow, Ulbricht presented a powerful argument for the wall before the assembled Warsaw Pact leaders and apparently secured Khrushchev's final approval in a private meeting. The only stipulation was that the operation would proceed gradually: barbed-wire obstacles would be erected quickly, to be followed later by a more permanent barrier, once the West's reaction had been gauged. Significantly, Khrushchev instructed Ulbricht that the barrier could be constructed at the border "and not one millimeter further." Soviet troops in East Germany were placed on alert and the operation was planned for the early morning of 13 August.⁴¹

Operation ROSE—the sealing of the sector border—proceeded rapidly, efficiently and in the greatest secrecy. Most Soviet officers in Berlin—including those of the KGB—were not aware of what was happening.⁴² Although western leaders were alive to the possibility of such an action—West German Foreign Minister Heinrich von Brentano had just expressed concern that "the Berlin door might close"—the actual event took everyone by surprise.⁴³ Penkovsky found out four days in advance, but he was unable to contact his western handlers in time to warn them.⁴⁴ The President, who was at the Kennedy compound at Hyannis Port, on Cape Cod, was notified by priority cable shortly

³⁸ Hope Harrison, "Ulbricht and the Concrete 'Rose': New Archival Evidence on the Dynamics of Soviet-East German Relations and the Berlin Crisis, 1958-1961," *Cold War International History Project Working Paper Nr. 5* (1993) p. 34.

³⁹ Zubok and Pleshakov, *op. cit.*, pp. 251-53.

⁴⁰ Freedman, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

⁴¹ Hope Harrison, *Driving the Soviets Up the Wall: Soviet-East German Relations, 1953-1961* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003) pp. 192-205.

⁴² Murphy, *et.al. op. cit.*, p. 377.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 374.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 377.

after 0700 on the 13th.⁴⁵ There was, in any case, little to be done. So long as the East German troops stayed on their own side of the border, so long as western treaty rights were respected, there was no legal basis for action. To make sure this was indeed the case, East Berlin issued a series of decrees over the morning of 13 August which made it clear that western treaty rights still stood.⁴⁶

Relief was the dominant emotion in Washington for the 24 hours following the border closing. The refugee problem had become acute, leading to concern that more drastic actions was in the offing: nearly 5,000 people had crossed over into West Berlin over 11-12 August alone.⁴⁷ Among them was a KGB officer and his wife, who had crossed into West Berlin a few hours before the border closed.⁴⁸ Closing the borders defused what had seemed to be an increasingly critical situation, moreover, it was seen as a Soviet action that could not be challenged: “[it was] *their* doing and *their* responsibility.” Kennedy issued a brief statement and then went sailing; Secretary of State Dean Rusk went to a ball game.⁴⁹

Berliners and West Germans reacted to this seeming complacency with fury: hundreds of thousands of West Berliners demonstrated at the Brandenburg Gate. The Governing Mayor of West Berlin, Willi Brandt, angrily demanded some action from Kennedy. Nearly forty years later, his Press Secretary and close advisor, Dr. Egon Bahr, recalled the frustration felt in Berlin:

It took hours (Dr. Bahr recalled) to convince the [Allied] commandants to give orders that [would put] at least some armed, uniformed people in jeeps patrolling the line. It took more than 24 hours before the commandants got permission to transmit a small, weak protest to their Soviet colleagues on the other side in East Berlin. It took more than 48 hours before the...High Commissioners, the four Ambassadors, established the protest from Bonn to East Berlin. It took 72 hours before the first protests came from Washington, Paris, London, to Moscow. This was the reality. After three days, when it was absolutely clear for the Eastern side and the Communists that no major tough reaction could be expected from the Western side, they started to build up the Wall.⁵⁰

The gradualist policy authorized by Khrushchev lasted less than a week. Within five days, West German soldiers had begun to replace the barbed wire with mortar and concrete blocks. The Berlin Wall was a reality.

⁴⁵ White House Hyannis (Port) from CIA/OCI, 1317Z 13 August 1961 (MORI: 219559) (www.foia.cia.gov).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Director from Berlin, 0059Z 13 August 1961 (MORI: 144331).

⁴⁹ Freedman, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

⁵⁰ Donald P. Steury, “Conference in Germany: On the Front Lines of the Cold War: The Intelligence War in Berlin,” *Studies in Intelligence* (Summer 2000) p. 8.

Although Kennedy has been accused of some callousness regarding East Berlin, his post-Berlin Wall actions should be judged not on the hours immediately after the closure of the border, but in the days and weeks that followed. Kennedy could not and did not try to do anything to help those East Germans who wished to flee to the West. He could and did take decisive steps to protect the freedom and independence of West Berlin. On 18 August, the Berlin garrison was reinforced by a regiment of troops from West Germany, arriving simultaneously with Vice-President Lyndon Baines Johnson, and former Military Governor Gen. Lucius D. Clay—Clay had defended Berlin during the blockade and airlift; his presence was a living symbol of American determination to stay in West Berlin.

Washington had good reason to stand fast on West Berlin. In September, a further report was received from Penkovsky. According to his information, building the wall was regarded by the Soviets as the “first pill” to be forced on Kennedy, which, if swallowed, would lead to a “second pill,” the oft-threatened peace treaty or, if necessary, military action to push the western allies out of Berlin.⁵¹ Although this latter information was viewed in CIA with some skepticism,⁵² inquiries nevertheless were made concerning West Berlin’s ability to withstand a siege.⁵³

DÉNOUEMENT

But, whatever Khrushchev’s actual standing in the Kremlin, the construction of the wall seemed to satisfy his need for a foreign policy coup. Although a nascent attempt to challenge western air access to Berlin was made on 23 August—and met with a warning that any attempt to intervene with western air traffic would produce “the most serious consequences”⁵⁴—the second pill forecast by Penkovsky never was forthcoming. Instead, on 29 September Khrushchev transmitted to Kennedy a personal letter which ranged discursively over Soviet-American relations in general and Berlin in particular. Kennedy responded on 16 October.

In this, the first of the so-called “pen-pal” exchanges, Khrushchev referred to the need for a peace treaty and the end to an occupation regime in Berlin, but he avoided deadlines and suggested negotiations. In his reply, JFK restated his willingness to negotiate, but called for a “peace which flows from actual conditions of peace, not merely treaties that bear that label.” Both leaders somewhat platitudinously agreed on the need to avoid “a vicious circle of bitter measures and countermeasures.”

A few days later, the opportunity to test that resolve appeared. On 22 October, Soviet and East German border guards attempted to interfere with State Dept Representative Allen Lightner’s access rights to East Berlin at Checkpoint Charlie.

⁵¹ Oleg Penkovsky, Meeting Nr. 31 in Steury (ed.), *On the Front Lines of the Cold War*, p. 558.

⁵² SNIE 11-10/1-61 *Soviet Tactics in the Berlin Crisis*, 5 October 1961; in *Ibid.*, pp. 561-68.

⁵³ Memorandum for the DCI; Subject: Survivability of West Berlin, 23 October 1962 in *Ibid.*, p. 573-74.

⁵⁴ Freedman, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

Lightner withdrew, and the border crossing was reinforced by all 24 tanks of West Berlin garrison. These were met by an equivalent number of Soviet tanks—out of the several thousand in the Group of Soviet Forces, Germany. The military confrontation that everyone had feared seemed to be at hand. But, even as Soviet and American tank commanders stared at each other over open gun sights, Kennedy, through his brother Robert, was exploiting a contact in the KGB Washington Rezidenz to communicate directly with Moscow. After two days, a stand-down was negotiated. Having defended their respective rights, both sides' forces backed away simultaneously.

As the noise of the tanks' diesels faded, so did Berlin's importance as a front-line bastion of the Cold War. Although more than a decade would pass before the great power relationships in Berlin were set down in an actual agreement, this only formalized the situation that had been established in the summer of 1961. War had been averted. The independence and freedom of West Berlin preserved, albeit at a price. Berlin was now divided in two, a division that lasted nearly 30 years until the wall finally, inevitably, came down.