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[Stefan Doernberg and Franz Koehler report: "August 61"--third of six installments]

[Text] When on 13 August 1961 the GDR secured its state border, all the plans of militarist quarters in the FRG and West Berlin to "redeem" the GDR, to incorporate it in the FRG, were foiled at one blow. Perplexity, helplessness and rage seized the advocates of such strategies. Some of them even asked for military intervention by the allied western powers: But these powers displayed a more somberminded attitude.

The U.S. ambassador to Bonn, Dowling, also calmly lived through the news that was again and again transmitted to him in the course of that Sunday morning. Without as much as turning a hair, he went to watch a baseball final in which American youths competed for the European championship in Bad Godesberg's Plittersdorf Ward. He was in select company with this attitude. His president, John F. Kennedy, who was just about to take a weekend trip on his yacht at Hyannisport, saw no reason why he should change his plans. Nor did French President de Gaulle lose his temper at his country house in Colombey-Les-Deux-Eglises. And Great Britain's Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, together with Foreign Minister Alex Douglas-Hume, left the next morning for partridge hunting in Scotland. Even NATO Secretary General Dirk Van Sticker saw no reason for interrupting his vacation.

In view of these facts there has been much speculation as to whether the leading politicians of the three powers which maintain occupation troops in West Berlin had been informed of the imminent events.

The Ambassador Is Surprised

U.S. Ambassador Dowling displayed surprise, for example, on Monday, 14 August--at a first meeting to which he had been invited by FRG Foreign Minister Brentano--at the fact that the FRG Government evidently had known nothing of the expected GDR border security measures. He pointed out that U.S. disarmament expert John McCloy had only recently visited Soviet Premier Krushchev at his vacation resort in Pitsunda on the Black Sea coast. The Soviet head of government had openly explained to him that the "human trap of West Berlin" would be closed. Bonn's Ambassador Greve was informed about this at the Washington four power working group for Germany.

According to some Western sources, at these talks the Soviet head of government had even explicitly requested that McCloy convey to President Kennedy that the imminent measures in Berlin would only affect traffic between the GDR and West Berlin, but would in no way affect the communications between West Berlin and the FRG or the rights of the Western Allies. By doing this, he had wanted to prevent the United States from misunderstanding the measures ahead and from reacting to them militarily if taken by surprise.

McCloy, asked at a later date about such a message from the Soviet premier, replied: "Well, obviously he wanted me to convey his official position to President Kennedy; that is, to my government. I cannot remember any special information. Possibly my notes would help in this respect."

The Closed Back Door

It is incredible for a diplomatic of McCloy's caliber not to be able to remember such an important event, even more so since the first secretary of the CPSU Central Committee and Soviet Premier Khrushchev, in a speech on 7 August 1961, confirmed this message in public when he stated, after an appeal to the Western powers to begin negotiations with the Soviet Union about detente in Europe, "the imperialists believe that the present situation opens a welcome back door to them for disturbing the development of the GDR as a socialist state.

They are using West Berlin as a strongpoint for subversive activities against the GDR and other socialist countries. The imperialists are only striving to open this back door even wider.... But they are being told instead...we shall...close your back door to the GDR."

More evidence also exists for the assumption that at least the heads of the Western powers were informed of the GDR's intention to secure its borders with West Berlin: On 10 August Marshal I.S. Konev, one of the most experienced military leaders of the Great Fatherland War, was appointed commander in chief of the group of USSR armed forces stationed in Germany.

On that same day he received in Wuensdorf the chiefs of the Western allied military missions in Potsdam for a first meeting. The participants in this meeting made it known shortly after 13 August that Marshal Konev had suggested in his toast that, regardless of what would happen in the next few days, Western allied interests would not be affected by it. However, when Colonel (Pawel) of the U.S. military mission in Potsdam subsequently was to confirm these statements by Konev in front of a TV camera, he said that "he could not remember them." The parallel with McCloy is evident. Moreover, even other involved persons in leading positions such as Kennedy's special adviser Theodore Sorenson suffered--when asked about the existence of such information--a conspicuous loss of memory. And the entire documentation concerning the news situation on the eve of 13 August was "no longer traceable" at the archives of the FRG Federal Information Service in Pullack.

What is conspicuous is that none of the persons involved went as far as to deny directly that the governments of the Western powers had been informed that the GDR would secure its borders to West Berlin even though the details and precise date of the preparations had remained unknown to them as a result of the perfect secrecy. The gaps in the memories of the named persons interviewed may be due to their official discretion.

For The Sake of Our Own Security

There is no need for such a chain of arguments to arrive at the final conclusion that the Soviet Union and the GDR had circumspectly seen to it that the governments of the Western Powers were spared any false reactions. A review of the last few days preceding 13 August 1961 proves that it must have been clear at least for attentive political observers that the existing situation of an uncontrolled, open border would not continue much longer.

The 13th SED Central Committee plenum took place in Berlin from 3-4 July. It became obvious in the speeches, contributions to the discussion and decisions that, in view of the constantly increasing provocations, disturbing economic measures and sabotage actions and of the intensifying ideological diversionist work from the FRG and primarily from West Berlin, the party must further enhance its fighting strength and must even more effectively arm itself for strengthening the GDR's sovereignty. Resolute measures were necessary to oppose the political and economic diversion, the currency manipulations and the more and more open and purposeful shanghaiing of experts and young people. A few days after that more than 5,000 activists of the Berlin Party organization convened at the Werner Seelenbinder Hall. They displayed their determination not to endlessly put up with the machinations aimed particularly against the residents of the GDR capital of Berlin. In his report, Paul Verner, first secretary of the SED Berlin Bezirk party organization, made it clear that the GDR was going to assert its own sovereign rights and put an end to the possibilities, originating in West Berlin, for causing disturbances.

In this context, he underscored that questions were involved which were an internal affair of the GDR and that nobody intended to interfere in West Berlin's internal system or to cut West Berlin's communications with other countries. Such an accentuated limitation of the impending political activities ought not to have escaped Western observers, just as tasks set for enterprises should not have escaped them, such as preparing solutions if Western deliveries and imports should stop in case of a further exacerbation of the political situation.

And the speaker's statement that each one of those present was dutybound to quickly further enhance the state of training and combat readiness of the combat groups, should have removed even the last doubts about the fact that the GDR would not content itself with empty protests against the continuous violations of its sovereignty.

On 26 July 1961 the SED Central Committee Secretariat deliberated with the members of the bureau of the SED Berlin Bezirk leadership on further enhancing the fighting strength of the Berlin party organization. In the next few days members and candidate members of the SED Central Committee Politburo went to rallies, large enterprises and key points of political and social life in the capital in order to activate party work through their personal example.

Exacerbation of the Situation

Since shanghaing, trafficking in human beings, sabotage activities and diversionist activities continued unabated, on 29 July the GDR Government penalized enticing employees away from their jobs, and appealed to the population to put an end to trafficking in human beings. However, the firebrands in the FRG, the more than 80 espionage and agent centers located in West Berlin, as well as the mass media, first of all RIAS [Radio in the American Sector] lost all sense of proportion and further exacerbated the situation. Plan lags developed in the enterprises, and insecurity spread among certain parts of the population as to whether the GDR Government would be capable of keeping developments under control. By the end of the month the untenability of the situation had become so obvious that even U.S. Senator James William Fulbright, who at that time was chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee of the U.S. Senate and thus had an important say in decisions on international questions, literally stated over television on 30 July: "I do not understand why the East Germans do not close their borders; I believe they would have a right do so."

No Answer From West Berlin

Despite the already tense situation, the GDR still strove to arrive at a solution of the problem of people working across the borders and at a normalization of the relations between the GDR capital and West Berlin by way of an amicable agreement. For this reason Friedrich Ebert, the greater Berlin mayor, on 30 July addressed a letter to West Berlin's ruling Mayor Willy Brandt, proposing to eliminate the tensions and to establish normal relations through negotiations.

At that time, however, the ruling quarters in Bonn as well as in West Berlin were not willing to acknowledge their blatant misinterpretation of the situation. They continued to insist on the claim to sole representation, a claim that was contrary to international law, ignored the GDR state's existence and continued their policy aimed at incorporating the GDR. At that time, Willy Brandt thought that he could ignore Friedrich Ebert's offer for an understanding.

On the last day of July, the bloc of antifascist parties and mass organizations appealed to all GDR citizens and asked them to further strengthen their socialist state and to vigorously oppose the disturbing measures proceeding from West Berlin. The "Otto Krahmann" brigade of Berlin's Oberspree cable works became the pioneer of new economic efforts. It stated in an appeal to the working people: "Do not permit any plan lag! Defeat the militarist with feats in socialist production!"

Committees for the "struggle against trafficking in human beings" emerged in many Berlin enterprises in the first 7 days of August. Some 600 workers, employees and members of the intelligentsia, Party members and people not affiliated with the Party, by their work strengthened the realization, growing in the enterprises, that the shanghaing and economic diversionist work could only be ended with resolute measures.

On 2 August a sentence passed by the GDR Supreme Court made it clear that the GDR's repeated declarations of intent to establish normal relations in Berlin were meant seriously: Five people who had made a job out of enticing away employees were sentenced to stiff jail sentences.