

HORIZONT SERIES ON BERLIN WALL CONCLUDES

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

[Text] In the early summer of 1961 Bonn's and West Berlin's harassment of the GDR had led to an unbearable situation.

Discrimination, sabotage, enticement to defect and other criminal methods compelled the GDR Government to put an end to these attempts to undermine its sovereignty. The cold warriors and advocates of aggressive strategies had to be shown the limits of their power; the time for that came on 13 August.

Within the shortest time the orders from the command centers of Erich Honecker, secretary of the GDR National Defense Council, reached both the commanders of National People's Army units and SED kreis leaderships, and subsequently the councils of the Berlin city districts, directors and party secretaries of the large enterprises, the leaderships of the ministries and other central agencies and institutions. In thousands of apartments the telephones were ringing. The alarm system of the militia detachments was running in high gear. After the men had been issued arms and ammunition, they marched to the border. When the sun on this Sunday in August came up over the roofs of the high apartment buildings of the center of Berlin, militia members had formed a living wall for hours. Protecting the border with their bodies, they stood there until the first, still provisional security installations were set up.

Meanwhile the SED members, but also thousands of trade unionists, nonparty people, women and children, informed by radio reports and by what was going on in the streets, gathered at their places of work. Many came who wanted to help, because they felt on that morning more than usually that this republic was also their republic. In the following days many of them applied for admission to the party of the workers class.

A Wave of Approval

The principal topic of the rallies and consultations at the enterprises was: How will we ensure well-functioning production on Monday? Hundreds of blue and white collar workers were standing at the border with their arms. Thousands of their colleagues pledged to take over part of their work in addition to their own. To fulfill, to overfulfill the plan--that is their contribution to show the world that the measures of 13 August were not only necessary but also useful.

The electrode makers of the Berlin-Lichtenberg VEB elektrokohle works issued an appeal to all GDR working people to strengthen the republic by a production drive. Their appeal called for raising labor productivity quicker than average wages by tapping all reserves, with a view to gradually compensating the economic damages that had been caused during the period of the open border.

The contributions through which the working people supported the measures of 13 August were as different as the individual people, the collectives and their opportunities, but what they all had in common was the will to manifest through deeds their loyalty to the republic at this hour. More than 250,000 young workers, peasants and students volunteered in August for honorable service in the armed units of the republic, to protect the socialist fatherland. This clear-cut profession of loyalty, too, had a sobering effect on those who tried to pose as exponents of the policy of strength.

The municipal transport workers found themselves confronted with some of the most difficult tasks. Timetables were changed, trains rerouted, tracks were laid, switches installed, and at the same time a well-functioning and above all safe traffic had to be maintained. The subway operated in accordance with the new timetable in a matter of hours. As far as the rapid transit railroad was concerned, things were more complicated. However, as early as around noon, its trains were running regularly on nearly all lines. Tens of thousands of Berliners used them for excursions to the countryside on that Sunday. The excursion lines of the Berlin Transport Company [BVG] buses were fully occupied. Life was going on, from now on within secured borders.

Sobering in The West

Along the border between the GDR capital and West Berlin, however, the atmosphere was far from that of a quiet Sunday. In the course of the afternoon--encouraged by Lemmer's harassing politicians--more and more frequently youngsters gathered into a mob on the West Berlin side, trying to provoke the militia members and the people's policemen. They did not succeed.

With every passing hour the border became more secure through additional barricades.

In the evening of that 13 August the GDR's border with West Berlin had acquired a different appearance, clearly recognizable for everyone. The road had been blocked for saboteurs and troublemakers.

This day, 13 August, made clear the real balance of forces in central Europe: The GDR neither allows itself to be blackmailed nor to be overrun. It is a stable factor of peace and has strong, reliable allies.

This day, 13 August, made clear that the cold war offered no way out of the problems. This day also touched off a sobering process in the West which ultimately led to the path toward detente, and contributed toward a policy of inviolability of borders, a policy of peaceful coexistence and mutually advantageous relations based on equal rights between states with different social systems.

On the evening of 13 August, however, that had not yet become clear to many people, primarily the FRG and West Berlin politicians. Some of them even called for "actions." Their continuing insistence on provocations, although it was probably no more than a skirmish and could not alter anything, was nevertheless not without danger. That is precisely why the GDR and its allies, by displaying a cool head and firmness, had to teach another few lessons to those who toyed with the idea of imperialist adventures.

Thus the USSR Government declared that it fully and entirely supported the GDR's measures for protecting its sovereignty, and that it would make every effort to prevent any attack on its ally and to preserve peace.

A Dangerous Farce

The situation was exacerbated anew in October 1961. U.S. President Kennedy had dispatched the former U.S. commander of Berlin, Gen Lucius D. Clay, to West Berlin as his special envoy. As early as in 1948 Clay had made the provocative demand to advance with tanks through the Soviet occupation zone and thus compel the Soviet Union to recognize the United States as world gendarme. Now he wanted to repeat, at least on a smaller scale, his muscle flexing that had been unsuccessful the first time. U.S. forces were to march into the GDR capital from the Friedrichstrasse border checkpoint, to demonstrate their "right to free access."

The deployment of U.S. tanks was to intimidate the GDR and to induce it to put up with this provocation. Clay had picked the end of October as the date for this provocation, when the 22nd CPSU Congress was to be held. With a cool head and discipline the GDR Border Guard forces foiled the planned provocation. A few U.S. soldiers marched behind several jeeps as far as Leipziger Strasse and then ran quickly back to the tanks that had been left behind in the U.S. sector. The whole thing was a farce, but indeed a dangerous one.

For the Protection of Peace

Constructive proposals, a policy marked by patience and reason, the readiness for a dialogue and for understanding must be accompanied by determination and firmness, so as to make imperialist politicians recognize the limits of their power. That also applied in 1961. The clearly manifested determination of the socialist states not to let their policy of peace, their construction work be disturbed made the NATO strategists and the centers of imperialist policy see reason, and prevented the conflagration of a third world war.

This day, 13 August 1961, was an example showing that peaceful coexistence and detente, a cool head and balanced consideration of the interests of the peoples as well as of an individual people, readiness for progressive compromise and principledness in protecting peace and socialism are part of the general line of socialist foreign policy.

The significance of 13 August 1961 extends far into the future: With the action to protect peace, the Berlin Workers Militia detachments, the armed forces and the entire GDR people consciously made history.