

A Brief History of the Berlin Crisis of 1961

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Autumn 2011 marks the 50th anniversary of the political crisis that resulted in the erection of the Berlin Wall which divided that German city for 28 years. The National Declassification Center of the National Archives and Records Administration and the Historical Collections Division of the Central Intelligence Agency have partnered to publish newly declassified documents that reveal intimate details of the five month Berlin Crisis of 1961.

Included in this joint publication are newly released documents that show behind-the-scenes security discussions and planning. The Department of State has added a contemporary 600-page report, never before disclosed, on the impact of the events surrounding the crisis and the deepening of the Cold War. Other documents explain the looming threat the crisis represented to the legal status and rights of the three Western Powers in Berlin; Britain, France and the United States, and provides a sense of the real-time spiral of statements, military acts, parry and feints, that led to international brinkmanship as the West went toe-to-toe with a USSR ready to annex or asphyxiate Berlin.

Events leading up to the Crisis 1958-1960

From the end of World War II in 1945, the question of Berlin's status 90 miles within the Deutsche Demokratische Republik (East Germany) and the Soviet Unions' zone of occupation, along with the status of Germany among the community of nations, remained a source of tension between the East and West. Premier Khrushchev continued to push President Eisenhower and the other Western leaders for resolution of the issue

In November 1958, Khrushchev issued an ultimatum giving the Western Powers six months to agree to withdraw from Berlin and make it a free, demilitarized city. If the West did not come to agreement, Khrushchev declared that "the German Democratic Republic had scrupulously observed the stipulations of the Potsdam Agreement with regard to the eradication of militarism and liquidation of the monopolies while the Western Powers had permitted the revival of militarism and economic imperialism in the German Federal Republic" (State Department, 1962, p. 2). He further threatened to turn over to a thuggish East Germany, complete control of all lines of communication with West Berlin; the Western Powers then would have access to West Berlin only by permission of the obstinate East German government. These accusations from Khrushchev were nothing new and the three Western Powers responded by rejecting the statements as continued Soviet propaganda, but the threat of turning over access to the DDR was something to be taken seriously and prepared for. In the end, the United States, United Kingdom, and France replied to the ultimatum by firmly

asserting their determination to remain in, and to maintain their legal right of free access to, the entirety of Berlin.

In May 1959, the Soviet Union withdrew its deadline and met with the Western Powers in a Big Four foreign ministers' conference. The conference failed to bestow any important concessions by either East or West nor reach any general agreements on Berlin; however, they did lead to Khrushchev's visit to the United States in September with Eisenhower at Camp David. Eisenhower started the discussion on Berlin on September 26, explaining that Berlin was of deep concern not only for the US government but also US citizens. Eisenhower felt that once the tensions between the two countries over Berlin had been resolved, the US and Soviet Union could begin productive dialogue and progress on numerous other issues. He stated that the US did not want to continue to maintain an occupation force in Berlin forever and agreed that the existing situation should be corrected.

Khrushchev, for his part, specified that he was in general agreement with the President's statement but did not understand how the Soviets' proposal for a free city of West Berlin could affect United States security. Khrushchev emphasized that the Soviet's approach to the Berlin problem came from necessity; that is, ending the state of war and concluding a final peace treaty with Germany. He further charged that the United States with maintaining an abnormal situation and a virtual state of war because of the position taken by Chancellor Adenauer, and that the US should not endorse the Adenauer policies. At the end of this visit, Khrushchev and Eisenhower jointly expressed that the most important world issue was general disarmament – including the problem of Berlin – and "all outstanding international questions should be settled, not by the application of force, but by peaceful means through negotiations." Khrushchev believed that an agreement with the US over Berlin was possible and agreed to continue the dialogue at a summit in Paris in May, 1960. But the Paris Summit turned out to be ill-fated, cancelled in the fallout from the Soviet shoot down of an American U-2 reconnaissance plane and the capture of Gary Powers on 1 May 1960.

New Administration: 1961 and the June Meeting in Vienna

In the post-summit climate, the Kennedy-Nixon presidential race was not immune to the effects of increased Soviet propaganda and numerous acts of physical harassment by the East German government turned into a belligerent display in support of Soviet policies on Berlin, reinforcing the East German regimes' claim that Berlin was within the territory of the GDR. One writer characterized the post-summit conference phase of the Berlin problem as a "cold war by proxy" (Speier, 1962, p. 114). However, the harassment against Berlin met with failure because of successful Western countermeasures and a general lack of interest on the part of Khrushchev to continue negotiating outstanding issues with the Eisenhower administration. Khrushchev would later call the election of Kennedy a "fundamental improvement" in Soviet-American relations (State Department, Feb. 1970, p.1).

On January 6, 1961, Khrushchev pronounced Soviet support for ongoing national wars of liberation and further stressed that the Western powers must end their "occupational regime" in West Berlin (State Department, Feb. 1970, p.1). This was the belligerent and threatening

environment that existed on January 20, 1961, when John Kennedy took the oath of office as the 35th President of the United States. The new Kennedy administration initially made no strong policy statement in regards to Berlin, preferring to allow the Soviets to take the initiative in any provocative posturing. Previously the US, after consultation with its allies, would put forward proposals concerning Berlin that were then rejected by the Soviets. The Kennedy administration did, however, confirm the US commitment to the security of West Germany and the people of Berlin.

Over the next several months, the Kennedy administration met internally to discuss US contingency planning for any Soviet move on Berlin. The developing US or western policy was one of allowing the Soviets to make initial proposals in regards to Berlin and its status. The State Department issued instructions that diplomatic replies to the Soviets were to recognize the unsatisfactory nature of the situation in Germany but that changing the status of West Berlin into that of a free city or a similar scheme would merely “increase the abnormality of an already abnormal situation” (State Department, Feb. 1970, p. 3)

On June 4, 1961, Khrushchev and Kennedy met in Vienna in hopes that the two could exchange views in a personal meeting. Leading up to the summit, Khrushchev had welcomed a spirit of cooperation that was developing with the new administration and also expressed regret over the heated international atmosphere resulting from events in Cuba. During the summit, however, an emboldened Khrushchev demanded an immediate peace treaty to reunite Germany under Communist terms. That failing, as it must, he vowed to sign a separate peace treaty with Communist East Germany which, by his way of thinking, would then be unleashed to cut off free-world access to West Berlin. If a peace treaty were signed “the state of war would cease and all commitments stemming from the German surrender would become invalid. This would apply to institutions, occupation rights, and access to Berlin, including the air corridors.” (State Department, Feb. 1970, p. 41) The three Western powers replied that no unilateral treaty could abrogate their responsibilities and rights in West Berlin, including the right of unobstructed access to the city. As the conversation over the status of Berlin grew more heated, Kennedy undercut his own bargaining position with the Soviet Premier when Kennedy conveyed US acquiescence to the permanent division of Berlin. This misstep in the negotiations made Kennedy’s later, more assertive public statements, less credible to the Soviets, who now saw him as indecisive and weak.

The City Divided: August 13/14, 1961

During the early part of August, the foreign ministers of three occupation countries (the United States, United Kingdom, and France) met to discuss “the diplomatic, propagandist and military aspects of the Berlin problem.” (State Dept, Feb. 1970, p. 51) The US believed that the West German government should be associated more closely with contingency planning and be full-fledged partners of the work of the Ambassadorial Steering Group in Washington regarding Berlin. Hurriedly, ministers, military leaders, and heads of state discussed Soviet motives and intentions, strengthening of the forces of the alliance, economic countermeasures, and Berlin contingency planning. The ultimate goal was to be able “to respond to any threat to Western

access and at the same time deter the Soviet Union from creating such a threat as a result of a peace treaty with the GDR.” (State Dept, Feb. 1970, p. 51) In a final analysis, the Western Powers determined that the Soviets were unwilling to risk war and that any actions on their part would be more defensive in nature.

Khrushchev, through Andrei Gromyko, the Soviet Foreign Minister, reiterated to the Western Powers that if a treaty was not forthcoming, the Soviets would conclude a separate peace treaty with the DDR. The Soviets continued to apply pressure for resolution on the Berlin question. In his speeches of August 7 and 11, Khrushchev conjured up the specter of nuclear war with the west if pushed by the United States. He “combined an aggressive stance with a posture of reasonableness” by publicly asking for multilateral conferences but “he offered no new proposals for negotiations and merely continued to insist that, if the Western Powers persisted in their refusal to sign a German peace treaty, this problem would have to be settled without them.” (State Dept., April 1970, p.73)

On Saturday August 12, 1961, East Berlin mayor Walter Ulbricht signed an order to close the border and erect a Wall. The tide of East Germans flooding to the West through the many roads, canals, crossings, and trains, came to an abrupt end. It is estimated that 3.7 to 4 million East Germans escaped to the West. The daily flow of refugees in the beginning of August was roughly 1, 500 East Germans, but after Khrushchev’s “bomb-rattling” speech, the daily number had risen to 1,926. On August 11, unbeknownst to all, the last 2,290 refugees seeking the freedoms of the west, entered the Marienfelde reception center in West Berlin. Overnight, in a swift, unexpected manner, the door to freedom closed, and was to remain so for 28 years.

On the night of 13-14 August 1961, East German police and military units sealed off all arteries leading to West Berlin. The communists pulled up train tracks and roads, erected barriers topped with barbed wire, completely isolating the Western sectors and preventing East Germans from escaping to the West. The fences and barricades completely surrounded the 97 miles around the three western sectors and 27 miles that cut through the heart of the city, dividing it. The Soviet Army moved three divisions closer to Berlin to discourage interference by the West and presumably to assist in the event of large-scale riots. From August 13-23, the Soviets and East Germans undertook a massive show of force in Berlin to stop the exodus of refugees to the West. In a direct response to Soviet and East German operations to cut off allied access to Berlin, at the end of August, Kennedy made a public show of ordering 148,000 National Guardsmen and Reservists to active duty.

The Standoff at Checkpoint Charlie, October 27, 1961

During the end of summer and into the fall of 1961, the Soviets and East German governments continued a general harassment of US forces traveling from Checkpoints Alpha and Bravo which allowed access through East Germany, and a series of threats were made by Soviets leaders concerning unfettered access to air corridors as well. Military and Allied diplomats were also harassed moving across the borders of the divided city. On 22 October 1961, just two months after the construction of the wall, the US Chief of Mission in West Berlin, E. Allan Lightner, Jr.

was stopped in his car (which had occupation forces license plates) while crossing at Checkpoint Charlie to go to a theater in East Berlin. This violated agreements made at the 1945 Potsdam Conference. It was at that point the General Lucius Clay, Special Advisor in West Berlin, decided to demonstrate American resolve.

The next day, Clay sent an American diplomat to test the East German border police. When the diplomat was stopped by East German transport police asking to see his passport, waiting US Military Police at the border recognized his diplomatic car, and rushed to escort him into East Berlin. The shaken GDR police moved out of the way. The car continued on and the soldiers returned to West Berlin. Over the next three days American and Soviet soldiers deployed at Checkpoint Charlie tested each country's resolve on how far each would go during these standoffs over Berlin. On October 24, twenty-six vehicles were stopped by East German police, only to have US military personnel escort the vehicles across the border and return back to the West.

On October 27, 1961, the provocative games took a serious turn as another probe prompted the Soviets to deploy 10 tanks on the Eastern side of Checkpoint Charlie. The US had been using tanks to support their escorts of vehicles into East Berlin, and now was met by equal force. The Soviet and American tanks stood a mere 100 yards apart from each other, and both sides readied for battle. The showdown of tanks at the wall became a visual emblem of the dangerous situation these world powers were locked into. The confrontation made headlines around the world and it looked as if the Cold War was soon to become a hot, shooting war with grave consequences. It was only after more sanguine heads prevailed that Moscow and Washington mutually agreed to pull back from the standoff, and the confrontation eased.

Introduction to the Essays

The Berlin Crisis of 1961 is a major turning point during the Cold War and answered, for a time, the question of Berlin; but unintended results from the events re-defined the Cold War over the next 18 years.

The story can be viewed as an impatient, frustrated, older, and seasoned Soviet Premier Khrushchev, seeking resolution to the Berlin question, having to confront a new, young, popular but untested American President. An emboldened Khrushchev breaks off discussions with the former American President Eisenhower over the U2 incident, and is then further bolstered by Kennedy's public failure and embarrassment over the Cuban Bay of Pigs fiasco. It has the mark of not only the tension between two men – Khrushchev and Kennedy – but to competing economic and social systems in a global war over which system would triumph. We have in the Berlin Crisis – viewed through these newly released documents – a more precise look at the tensions between the military strategic thinking and reliance on the nuclear umbrella of US missile defense versus use of more conventional forces. This argument is revealed through countless internal documents and was a serious, highly debated issue when the West was forced into the review of contingency planning on Berlin. The West did not have sufficient forces for a conventional fight, and yet would not want to be seen – by the US or its Western

Allies – as too ready to use nuclear weapons in response to Soviet or East German intervention of British, French, and US rights to travel to Berlin via the autobahn, trains, or designated air corridors. The use of the nuclear option would not be balanced and would exceed the actions taken by the Soviets, and would trigger the negative opinion of most non-aligned countries. The other conflict during the crisis was internal, bureaucratic wrangling between the NATO Secretary General Stikker, and the British, French, and United States Supreme Allied Commander, US General Nordstat.

The contributions on the Berlin Crisis from these authors highlight several contentious issues within the Western Alliance that, despite differences during this very crucial and critical time, did not vitiate the Allies unified stance to counter the USSR/GDR threat. The results of the 1961 crisis led the West to expend resources for closing the conventional force gap that existed between the Warsaw Pact and NATO. The West lacked sufficient conventional forces to support and sustain combat operations against overwhelming Warsaw Pact forces. This lack of conventional forces limited the Kennedy administrations' actions on what it could accomplish in the face of quick, aggressive Soviet moves on Berlin outside of simple recognition, and allowed the West to continue their claim of access to the East, and non-recognition of the East German government, and force access to East Germany and East Berlin.

The three essays drafted for this publication, and the release of the Department of State's "Crisis over Berlin," shows the wide variance in the issues surrounding the events of 1961. Although we have used documents from as early as the 1946 period, our focus has been those events starting with the Vienna Summit between Khrushchev and Kennedy through the 1961 standoff between the US and Soviet tanks in October of that year. One should not let the talks on Berlin between Kennedy and Khrushchev, and the dangerous world power standoff in October, overshadow the concerns and fears of the people of Berlin caught in the middle of a confrontation between two super powers. Berlin had long been a source of friction between east and west, and Khrushchev continued to push for resolution on the Berlin's legal status. Khrushchev's meeting with Kennedy and the passing of the now famous "aide-mémoires" only aspirated the situation and renewed US and Soviet tensions over Berlin. Khrushchev's frustration with the slowness in Western response, and his own hot rhetoric, should come as no surprise, for each time Khrushchev spoke on the subject it resulted in an increase in East Germans heading West through Berlin. And those mass exoduses added to the tension.

For this publication, the Department of State declassified one of the most significant documents written on the Berlin Crisis of 1961. The eight-part study, covering the period November 1958-December 1962, in 600 pages presents a very detailed account of the events leading up to, and throughout, the 1961 Crisis. Titled "Crisis over Berlin" and drafted by the Department of State's Historical Office after the Wall was erected by the East Germans, captures the serious tension, and contemporary understanding of the Soviet and GDR intentions on Berlin. Part VI covers the period from June through September cataloging the different events on the internal US discussions, international efforts with the British, French, Germans, and NATO, and the US military planning. It provides great detail on the many issues of the day and took several years to complete. Martin Hillenbrand directed the study.

Dr. Pedlow's "NATO and the Berlin Crisis of 1961" discusses the NATO planning efforts during the crisis. During the previous years, the NATO alliance had come to rely on the US nuclear strategic umbrella in its military planning and as a potential response to the Soviets and Warsaw Pact in regards to West. The 1961 Crisis, and the Kennedy administration's efforts to move away from reliance on nuclear weapons, was coupled with a move to increase US and NATO conventional forces. The Crisis forced NATO military defense planning to reevaluate conventional force levels and led to an increase in defense spending, initiated by Kennedy. Dr. Pedlow captures the operational details, and discussions by the LIVE OAK contingency planning staff, established in 1958, for anticipating the Soviet intentions on Berlin. Along with the Washington Ambassadorial Group, these discussions created tension between the three Western Powers and NATO (Stikker) as to the military planning and acceptable allied response. The question was answered, in the end, that the NATO General Secretary would direct all military planning.

Dr. Don Carter's "The US Military Response to the 1960-1962 Berlin Crisis" details the US Army's role and, more specifically, the role of the 7th US Army Europe and that of the newly formed Berlin Brigade, during the Crisis. It describes the moves made by the Army in Berlin from patrols and their challenging of the Soviet attempts to halt US mission vehicles from entering the Eastern sectors which expected to pass without inspection, and the US diplomats' refusal to show their identification to anyone but Soviet military. The essay highlights the increased training by US troops in Berlin, defending or attacking, and planning to squash any Soviet-initiated rioting. The training balanced the dual military capability on riot-control drills and combat defense operations. The US military commanders were under pressure from local German officials to cut the wire, and knock down the barricades with US military bulldozers. The Germans were concerned by – and suspicious of – the apparent lack of US force or any appearance of concern by US commanders in Berlin. US Army forces were increased both in Berlin and Germany as well as committed to NATO conventional forces. The arrival of the US troops on August 18th to Berlin – expecting to be stopped by Soviet to GDR troops – is a pivotal moment. When the Americans arrived in the city dressed in full field equipment, they received a hero's welcome and were paraded in front of Vice President Johnson and General Clay. The paper also nicely details the actual events leading up to and including the standoff at Checkpoint Charlie.

Dr. Steury's "Bitter Measures: Intelligence and Action in the Berlin Crisis, 1961" covers the US intelligence efforts to assist US civil and military policymakers with evaluations of Soviet and GRU intentions on the status of Berlin. The essay details the significant reports and studies produced by the CIA during the height of the Crisis, and we read the documentation by CIA analysts of the unfolding actions and counteractions. After the 1958 Crisis, CIA focused its attention on the Soviets' true intentions on undermining the US legal status in Berlin. The CIA also was directed to study Soviet responses to the various NATO plans and meetings. Dr. Steury accurately captures all three aspects of the Berlin Crisis from the Intelligence Community attempting to understand what was happening in real time, the US military responding to the GRU's blockading access, up to the new administration finding itself in a crisis that had been in the works before Kennedy had taken office.

The newly Released Documents

Since 1995, the United States government has reviewed 1.4 billion pages of classified information and exempted millions that original classification authorities believed needed further protection and were not released. Documents from the 1961 Berlin Crisis were among the many pages withheld from public disclosure and are now released through the coordination of the National Declassification Center and its' Agency partners. Altogether, the NDC will release over 500 documents, comprising almost 4,000 pages of textual records, at this Berlin Crisis Conference.

The declassification of documents surrounding the Allied Contingency Planning on Berlin is an ongoing process. NATO, through its Archives Committee, Germany, and the United States has slowly released – through consultation and review – many of the most sensitive documents. The latest releases of these *Operation Live Oak* and Contingency Planning documents continue to expand our understanding of what western civil and military leaders at the time were concerned with in regards to the Soviet intentions in Berlin. “How should Western Allies respond to Soviet or East German moves against Berlin? What level of force should be used to defend Western interests?” Throughout the summer of 1961 the story unfolded in dozens of documents, reports, meetings, and discussions on an Allied response that risked starting a nuclear war in the heart of Europe.

The release of these newly declassified documents provides a fascinating, detailed snapshot of those moments in the Crisis, and furthers our understanding of a significant and critical series of events during the Cold War. The Berlin Wall would stand for another 28 years before the people of East Germany would peacefully rise up and regain their freedom.

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