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Recollections and reflections

The Berlin Wall: Intelligence and Policy

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The call came shortly after 2:00 a.m. on 13 August 1961, which was also the 13th day since I had arrived in Berlin and taken over as Chief of Base. "It's happening. Better come in," was all Deputy Base Chief (b)(3)(c) needed to say. "It" could only mean what Berlin Operations Base had long thought could be the outcome of the current Berlin crisis initiated by Krushchev in November 1958: the Soviets were closing the Sector Border dividing East Berlin from West Berlin. In fact, the Base had cabled Headquarters a few days earlier that tension had greatly increased over the past week as the flow of refugees to West Berlin reached flood proportions; the Soviets and East Germans would very soon have to do something to stop it.

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Closing the Border

But now, less than two hours later, that question had been answered. East German troops of the "National People's Army" had been brought by trucks from their home stations, carrying with them rolls of barbed wire and concrete fence posts. In a well-coordinated action they had arrived simultaneously at their assigned points along the entire Sector Border, where they at once began erecting barbed-wire barriers and establishing guard posts to prevent East Germans from crossing into West Berlin.

In a remarkably brief time East German police and military had taken control of the border. The S-Bahn, the elevated railroad serving all Berlin but operated by East German railroad authorities, ceased service to West Berlin. Strict document controls were instituted at all subway stations in East Berlin to identify, and remove from the train, any East Germans travelling on the subway, which was operated by West Berlin rail authorities and continued to provide service between East and West Berlin. Before daybreak on 13 August travel by East Germans across the 27-mile-long Sector Border had been almost completely halted. Krushchev had taken action, as he had so long threatened, and he had now directly challenged the wartime-agreed Allied rights in Berlin, which were the basis for the American, British and French presence in the city, geographically 100 miles from West Germany and surrounded by the Soviet Zone.

Wartime Agreements on Allied Rights in Berlin

The rights of the Western Allies in Berlin were created by Allied agreements on the terms for the postwar occupation of Germany. Negotiation of the key issue—the location of the border between the Soviet and the Western Allied Zones and the boundaries of Greater Berlin—had already been completed in 1943 by the European Advisory Commission, which met in London to plan the Occupation, comprising the Soviet and American ambassadors to Great Britain and a representative of the British Foreign Office.

The Soviet and British Governments gave their approval to the proposed boundaries in February 1944, and President Roosevelt approved them in April 1944. The Soviet-Western Allied border on the Elbe created by that agreement remained unchanged from beginning to end of the occupation period.

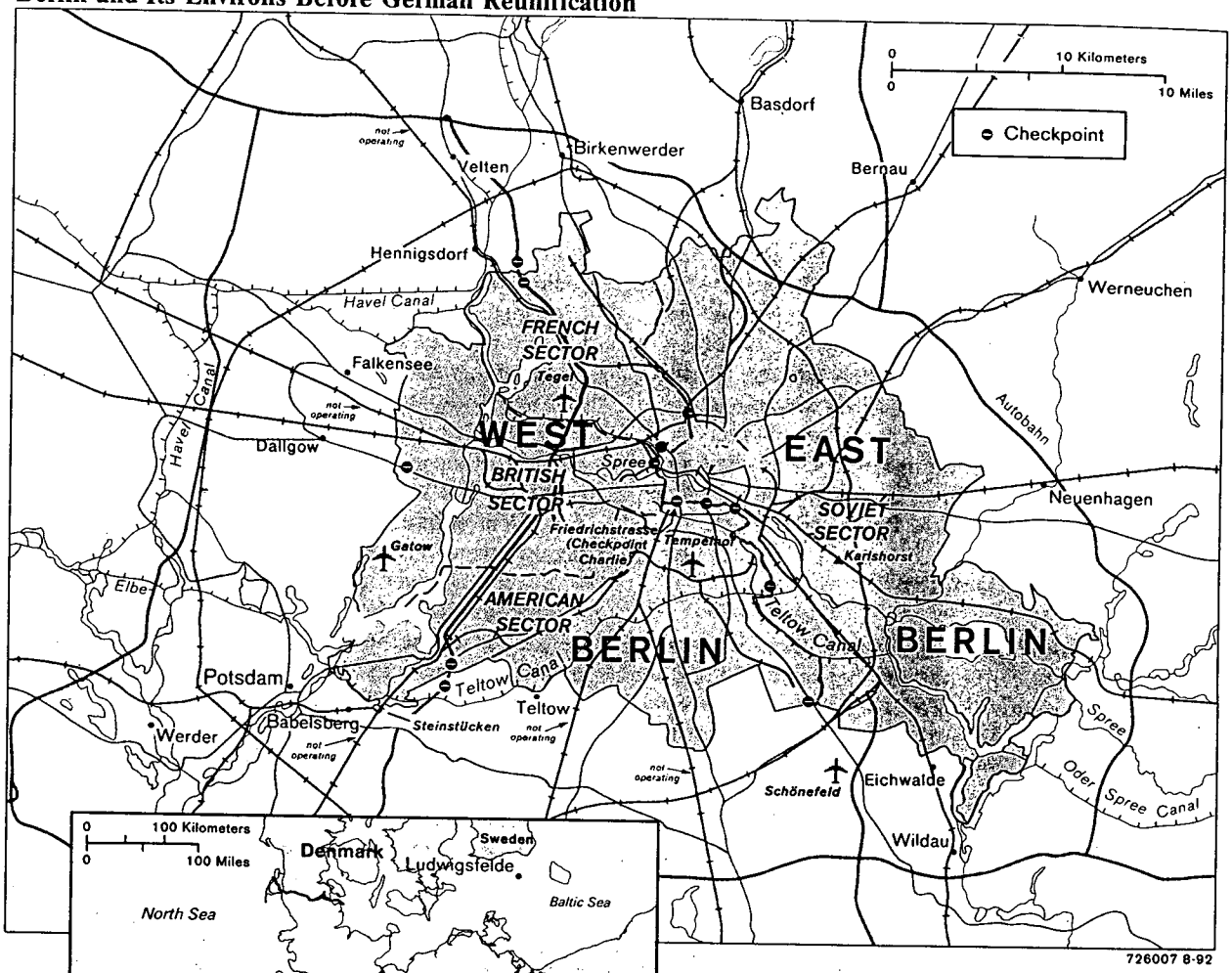
Soviet Pressures

The dates of those agreements are significant; they bear a direct relationship to the status of the war. By the end of January 1943, the Soviets had overwhelmed the Germans at Stalingrad, forced the surrender of the entire German Sixth Army commanded by Field Marshal Paulus, and launched a major offensive on the Eastern Front which made steady progress from then on. The tide of World War II had turned in favor of the Allies. But the landing of the Western Allied Forces in Normandy was not to occur for another 18 months, in June 1944. During those 18 months, while the Allies negotiated the postwar settlement, the Soviets capitalized on their strong position, pressed for the opening of the Western Front (dismissing the Allied campaign in Italy as contributing little to reducing the forces available to the Germans to oppose the Soviets in the east) and kept pressure on British and American negotiators to adopt insofar as possible Soviet proposals for the postwar settlement as part of supporting the Soviet war effort.

Preparing for Occupation

By November 1944, while major battles were underway on both the Eastern and Western Fronts, the European Advisory Commission had reached agreement on organizational and policy aspects of the occupation. Each of the Commanders in Chief was to have supreme authority over his Zone, subject to veto only by unanimous agreement of the three (amended in May 1945 to four, to include the French) Commanders acting as the Allied Control Council for all Germany, which was to be located in Berlin, in theory to control a Germany-wide government. A separate Quadripartite Kommandatura, comprising the four Berlin Commandants, was to control the administration of a government of Greater Berlin, with each Berlin Commandant vested with supreme authority over his Sector, again subject only to unanimous veto by all four Commandants. Chairmanship of the Quadripartite Kommandatura was to be rotated among the four Commandants, just as the Chairmanship of the Allied Control Council was to be rotated among the Commanders in Chief.

Berlin and Its Environs Before German Reunification



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These agreements were the basis of the right of the Western Allies to be in Berlin. Their intent was to make the entire territory of Greater Berlin officially subject to the control of all four Allies through the Quadripartite Kommandatura.

A Significant Omission

One decision was made whose consequences would long be felt by the Western Allies: no agreement pertaining to the right of free Allied ground access between West Germany and Berlin was ever put in writing or even negotiated with the Soviets. At that time, the view of the Western Allies was that their right of access to Berlin was so clearly implied as to make specific agreement unnecessary. Only the air corridors were defined in writing at the outset of the occupation, a step necessary for safety reasons.

Soviet Obstructionism

It is worth noting that, with the exception of the geographic locations of the borders between East and West Germany, between East Germany and Greater Berlin, and between East and West Berlin, all of the agreements on Allied rights in Germany and in Berlin were challenged or abrogated by the Soviets early in the occupation period. Soviet cooperation in the Allied Council diminished as Western Allied troop strength declined (while the Soviets continued to maintain substantial forces in East Germany), and in March 1948 Marshal Sokolovsky, the Soviet Commandant, walked out of the Allied Council never to return when the Western Allies authorized currency reform in West Germany after the Soviets refused to extend the measure to their Zone.

The Soviet Berlin Commandant walked out of the Allied Kommandatura Berlin in June 1948, and thereafter the Soviets administered East Berlin separately. (The Soviets also soon ignored the provision of the agreements that no restrictions were to be imposed upon the free circulation of the local populace within Greater Berlin). The most dramatic challenge to Allied rights was the Soviet blockade of ground and water access between West Germany and Berlin from 24 June 1948 to 12 May 1949, during which time West Berlin was sustained by the Allied airlift. And from 1949 on, although the blockade was not reimposed, the Soviets frequently interfered with access between West Germany and Berlin. This kept alive a crisis atmosphere which on several occasions moved senior officials of Western Allied governments to make public statements reaffirming Allied rights in Berlin and Allied determination to preserve the freedom of West Berlin.

The Khrushchev Ultimatum

No challenge since the Berlin Blockade had posed such a threat to Allied rights in Berlin as did Khrushchev's note, sent separately to the US, Great Britain, and France on 27 November 1958. It declared that the Soviet Union regarded ". . . as null and void the Protocol of the Agreement . . . on the zones of occupation in Germany and on the administration of Greater Berlin." The Soviet Union proposed that West Berlin be converted into an independent political unit—a free city—and be demilitarized. The Soviet Union also intended ". . . to turn over to the Government of the German Democratic Republic . . . the functions temporarily performed by the Soviet Union . . . but would make no changes in the present procedure for military traffic of the USA, Great Britain, and France from West Berlin to the Federal Republic of Germany for half a year . . . to allow them time to agree on proclaiming West Berlin a Free City." If agreement was not reached within that time, the Soviet Union intended to carry out its plan to allow the GDR to ". . . exercize its sovereignty on land, on water, and in the air . . ." and the Soviets would terminate all contact with representatives of the armed forces of the US, Great Britain, and France in questions pertaining to Berlin.

Going to Geneva

The immediate reaction of the Western Allies was to seek a dialogue with the Soviet Union about Berlin, and, shortly before the 6-month "deadline" expired, the Soviets agreed to a conference of the four Foreign Ministers, to be held in Geneva commencing 11 May 1959. A significant concession had been required of the Western Allies to get the Soviet Union to the conference table: representatives of the "GDR" would be allowed to attend. Although the GDR representatives were not official participants and were seated at a table separate from that of the "Big Four" Foreign Ministers, they were present. And from time to time during the conference they were even consulted as though they represented a sovereign state.

The conference caused great concern in the Federal Republic as well as in Berlin. Fortunately, the Foreign Ministers could not reach any agreement and the conference adjourned without setting a date for a further meeting. From time to time thereafter, Krushchev kept tension high by repeating his objective of concluding a separate peace treaty with the GDR, but he took no further action during President Eisenhower's term of office. In retrospect, it was perhaps just as well from the Berlin standpoint that the summit meeting scheduled for May 1960 in Paris was canceled because of the U-2 shootdown. Several Allied concessions had been discussed, although not agreed, at the Geneva Conference, including a substantial reduction of the Allied military garrisons in Berlin, and Krushchev might have pressed his demands vigorously, using such items as his point of departure. In any event, the Berlin issue remained dormant until Krushchev's meeting in Vienna in June 1961 with the new US President, John F. Kennedy. At that meeting, Krushchev revived in bellicose tones his threat to conclude a separate peace treaty which would cancel the wartime agreements pertaining to Berlin and openly threatened to resort to war if the Allies tried to interfere. The President held firm. Clearly, the Berlin crisis was still on.

Contingency Planning

The Krushchev ultimatum had rung alarm bells in CIA's Berlin Base from the day it was received in 1958. Unlike policy levels of Allied governments, which generally viewed the ultimatum as a threat to the access routes between Berlin and West Germany, the intelligence operatives in Berlin saw the proclaimed Soviet intention of granting sovereign rights to East Germany as a direct threat to the largely uncontrolled access between East and West Berlin. This free access was the key element in practically all Berlin operations. It meant that East Germans and persons from any country who could manage to get to East Berlin would then be able to come to West Berlin and return to the East without a visa and without the visits being recorded by Communist authorities. The Soviet threat to grant the GDR sovereignty, if implemented, would inevitably transform the open Sector Border into an international border with some form of document and customs controls.

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Alerting Headquarters

Well prepared though Berlin Base was for the closing of the Sector Border, none of its sources had been able to report what the Soviets were going to do. But the reasons refugees gave for leaving (often, they simply said that "everyone else at the factory is gone"), and the statistics we could compile in West Berlin showing the mounting daily total of refugee arrivals, convinced us by 8 August that some action was imminent. We sent Headquarters a cable on that date reporting our belief that the situation in East Germany was deteriorating rapidly. Over 2,000 refugees were being registered each day in West Berlin, and an atmosphere of fear that "the gates were about to close" appeared to pervade all East Germany. The Soviets, we wrote, must soon take action to stop the flight to West Berlin, in particular of skilled and semi-skilled workers whose loss was seriously disrupting the East German economy.

An Ominous Sign

Our prediction appeared to be confirmed three days later, when the Chief of the US Potsdam Military Mission reported that he and his British and French counterparts had been summoned to Soviet Military Headquarters in Zossen/Wuensdorf late the day before, Thursday, 10 August. There they were received, quite unexpectedly and without any prior notice, by Marshal of the Soviet Union Ivan S. Konev, a leading Soviet hero of World War II. He had been Commander of the Soviet Forces which invaded Poland and Czechoslovakia, and which had joined Marshal Zhukov in the assault on Berlin. In the immediate postwar era, Konev was Commander of Soviet Occupation Forces in Austria, where, in sharp contrast to the Soviets in Germany, he participated actively with the other Allied Commandants in Allied Control Council oversight of the Austria-wide National Government. For a short time, he was a deputy in the Supreme Soviet, then he was recalled to active military assignment as the first Supreme Commander of the Warsaw Pact Forces, a post he held from the Pact's inception in May 1955 until he retired in July 1960.

Konev was trusted by Krushchev, and his sudden appointment as Commander of Group of Soviet Forces Germany (GSFG), displacing Colonel General Ivan Yakubovsky, was a clear indication that a Soviet action of high political significance was imminent. But despite all the signs that something would happen, and soon, there was no agreement among the intelligence community representatives, or among State or US military officials in Berlin, what that something would be or when it would occur.

A State of Shock

Neither we nor the Berlin populace had long to wait. When daylight came on 13 August, it was evident that the entire Sector Border had been cordoned off by East German forces. A state of shock pervaded East and West Berlin alike. Everyone awaited some sign from the Western Allies, some move that would restore the open border. But they waited in vain, and saw only that stronger barriers were being erected. One after another of the former 60-some crossing points was closed, until only 12 remained passable, and those to authorized traffic only. The number would continue to be reduced.

No representatives of the Western Allies were in evidence at the Sector Border. A handful of West Berlin Police kept watch along the Western side. A few American officials, principally State Department officers from the US Mission, made discreet visits to the border, and some crossed into East Berlin to reconnoiter the crossing points which had been left open.

A number of Berlin Base officers also walked about in East Berlin, getting some sense of the mood of the populace.

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From his Headquarters in Heidelberg, General Bruce Clarke, Commander, US Army Europe, ordered that no US soldier was to come "closer than a baseball throw" to the Sector Border, and this was interpreted for the Berlin Garrison to mean the prowess of a big-league outfielder. Thus no uniformed personnel were to be seen at the Sector Border.[2]

The Emergency Operations Center at US Headquarters, Berlin, was frantically busy, but this was invisible to the Berlin populace. Continuous consultation was underway with the US Embassy in Bonn and the US Military Commands in West Germany, and with Washington. The same applied to the Berlin Headquarters of the British and French Commandants and their respective superiors; the three Allied Commandants and the heads of their diplomatic missions also exchanged views frequently. They all hoped somehow to find a feasible response to this final abrogation by the Soviets of the postwar agreement that Greater Berlin would be the joint responsibility of the four Allied Commanders.

Disillusionment

But the people of West Berlin were only aware that Sunday passed without word from the Western Allies. Monday came and went, and the West Berliners' state of shock began to turn to disillusion, then anger. The East Germans imposed further controls on Monday night, requiring special permits for cars with West Berlin registration to enter East Berlin. More East German armed guards were in evidence, some blocking the escape for East Berliners via the waterways which form the Sector Border at several points. And still only the West Berlin Police confronted the East German security forces at the Sector Border.

The only public statement from the Western Allies was a call for negotiations with the Soviets. Worse, the West German ambassador in Washington notified Bonn on Monday evening that the Ambassadorial Group, the high-level coordinating group consisting of French, British and US diplomatic representatives which was set up after the Krushchev ultimatum of 1958, would not endorse even mild measures in retaliation for fear of making the situation worse.

Press reaction to the Allies' silence soon became strident. "The West Does Nothing" filled the entire front page of a Berlin tabloid. And the paper with the largest circulation in West Germany, the *Bildzeitung,* headlined "We Are Dissillusioned"—"*Wir Sind Entaeuscht*"—conveying, as clearly intended, the implication that the Allies had not kept faith with West Berlin and West Germany. The Berlin Sector Border was becoming a national issue in the Federal Republic, and it was even raising questions about the ability and willingness of the Allies to defend West Berlin's freedom.

A Mild Rebuke

Tuesday afternoon the Allied Commandants finally were authorized by their governments to protest to the Soviet Commandant the closing of the border. But here, too, the low-profile policy prevailed: the protest was not delivered to Soviet Headquarters in Karlhorst in the customary manner. Instead of being delivered personally by one of the Commandants, it was sent by messenger from the Allied Staff. News of the mildly worded protest only increased the apprehensions and anger of the West Berliners.

By Tuesday evening, it was evident that the West Berlin populace was rapidly losing confidence in the Western Allies. That same evening Berlin Base sent a long cable to Headquarters describing this mood. Suddenly, the cable reported, West Berlin had become the problem. It pointed out that the local populace would look in particular to the US to take the lead and to act as decisively as it did in 1948, when it sustained West Berlin during the blockade. How the US reacted would have decisive effect upon the morale and confidence of the West Berliners.

A Personal Protest

At 2:00 a.m. on 16 August, following a not very encouraging da(b)(1)
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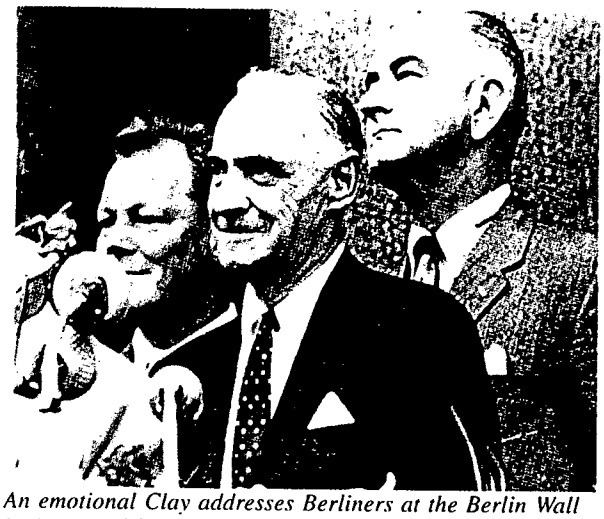
Brandt Speaks

On Wednesday, 16 August, nearly 500,000 angry West Berliners gathered at the Town Hall. Brandt's political sensitivity and his oratorical powers managed to calm their fears somewhat; he urged them to have confidence and patience. He revealed that he had written President Kennedy, asking, among other things, that the Allied garrisons be reinforced; that Allied troop convoys be sent on the Autobahn between Berlin and West Germany to emphasize the continuing right of Allied access; that "token" Allied forces take up stations along the Sector Border; and that other measures be taken symbolizing the freedom of West Berlin and its ties to West Germany.

LBJ's Visit

On Thursday, 17 August, the formal Allied protest was delivered in Moscow, the text of which stated that, "the East German sealing of the frontier . . . had the effect of limiting, to a degree approaching complete prohibition, passage from the Soviet Sector to the Western Sectors of the city," which Jean Smith termed "one of the great understatements of diplomatic communications."[3] It did nothing to encourage the West Berliners. But Friday finally brought promising news: President Kennedy announced that he would strengthen the Berlin garrison and that he was sending Vice President Johnson to make a firsthand appraisal of the Berlin situation. The Berliners were even more encouraged by the fact that General Lucius Clay, who in their eyes was the hero of the airlift, would accompany Johnson.

The Vice President's visit that weekend did much to reassure the populace. Enormous crowds lined the route of the motorcade. The high point of the day from the Berliners' standpoint was the arrival of the lead element of a US Battle Group from West Germany in mid-afternoon. The announcement that it would be replaced by another battle group from West Germany every three months, and that this rotation of battle groups would continue as long as necessary, was welcomed with cheers; it meant that the Berlin Garrison was to remain at a reinforced level and that the right to use the ground-access route to Berlin would be regularly asserted.



An emotional Clay addresses Berliners at the Berlin Wall in August 1961. LBJ and Brandt look on.

But these measures would not change anything at the Sector Border, where indeed the situation became more ominous as the East Germans began replacing the barbed wire fences with a masonry wall, increasing fears that control of the Sector Border was to be permanent. Nonetheless, Special Assistant to the Secretary of State Charles "Chip" Bohlen, who accompanied Johnson to Berlin, privately instructed Lightner to "cool it" because Berlin was not a popular issue back in Washington.

While Johnson's visit had not changed the Berlin situation, it had important results in Washington. He returned home with a vivid impression of the effect of the closure of the Sector Border. He saw that the people of West Berlin were in a state of shock and that Washington had badly misjudged the effect of the situation upon West Berlin. His report made a strong impression on the President; so did the continued tightening of controls at the Sector Border by the East Germans.

Turning the Screws

On Wednesday, 23 August, the total number of crossing points had been reduced to seven, of which Allied Forces were permitted to use only one, at Friedrichstrasse, which became known worldwide as "Checkpoint Charlie." Shots were fired by border guards to warn off people who approached too close to the barriers on the East side, and residents of buildings located directly on the border were being evacuated and the buildings' doors and windows bricked up. Increasing demands were made of members of Allied Missions in West Berlin to show identity documents when crossing into East Berlin, contrary to Four-Power Agreements. And a US Army bus, carrying uniformed US soldiers on a regularly scheduled US Army sightseeing tour of East Berlin, was delayed over an hour by East German border guards demanding identity documents. The incident received wide publicity in East and West Germany.

Alarmed by declining morale in West Germany and West Berlin, and with it confidence in the US and the other Western Allies to defend West Germany against Soviet aggression, Chancellor Adenauer wrote President Kennedy to this effect on 29 August. He emphasized that Allied inaction was encouraging neutralist sentiment in West Germany. All these factors, and more, had their effect: Kennedy announced on 30 August that General Clay was returning to Berlin as his personal representative, and would take up this post immediately after the 17 September West German election.

Clay Returns

Clay arrived in Berlin on 19 September, and lost little time in carrying out an action designed to assert the US—and by extension, the Western Allied—right of unimpeded access to Greater Berlin. On 21 September he tried to go by car to the tiny exclave of Steinstuecken, officially part of the American Sector, but physically separated from the American Sector and accessible only via a road several hundred yards long, running through the Soviet Zone. He was prevented from doing so by the East German guard, so the next day he flew to the settlement in a helicopter. The political war over Allied rights in Berlin had at last begun.

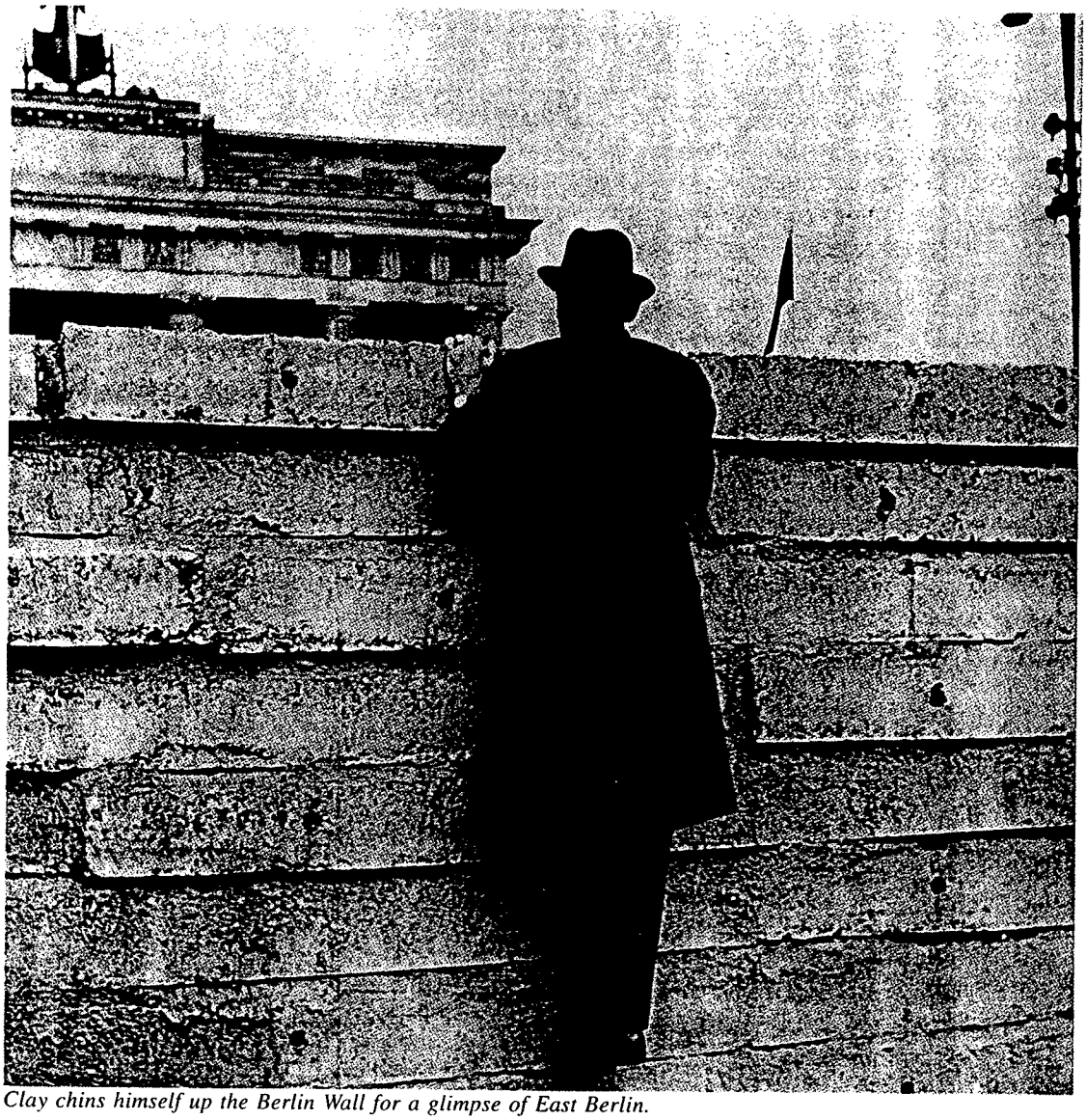
Working with Clay

The US Mission provided Clay a rather modest staff. This proved to be a real advantage to Berlin Base, because Clay and the new DCI, John McCone, were close friends, and the DCI directed us to provide him all possible support. Thus we got to see him frequently. I brought him a specially prepared *Current Intelligence Bulletin* every day, and we often discussed actions which it might be possible to undertake in East Germany to discredit the Wall.

In our conversations, Clay invariably emphasized that anything he undertook would conform with Four-Power Agreements. He considered for a time breaking through the Wall by ramming it with a tank, stipulating in discussing the possibility that the tank driver would withdraw to the western side of the Sector Border immediately thereafter, to show that the US was making no claim that armed US military were authorized to be in East Berlin. Clay also was interested in various "wonder potions" which were supposed to dissolve concrete blocks of the sort used to construct the Wall, and he shared our disappointment that none lived up to their claims. It was particularly encouraging to me to realize that he was alert for any opportunity which would unmistakably demonstrate that the Soviets were responsible for the Wall.

A Fortuitous Incident

Such an opportunity came on the evening of 22 October, when Minister Lightner, accompanied by his wife and driving his personal car, was denied access to East Berlin, where the Lightners had intended to go to the opera. Lightner knew everything about the US rules for access to East Berlin, which prohibited officials from showing identity documents, and he also carried in the car a checklist of the procedures to be followed in the event entry of a member of the American Mission was impeded. He identified himself orally, refused to show any documentation, and following the guidelines tried to move his car slowly forward in a show of righteous determination. But the East German guard did not step aside; instead, several more guards jumped in



Clay chins himself up the Berlin Wall for a glimpse of East Berlin.

front of his car and blocked the way. In accordance with the SOP, Lightner demanded to see a Soviet officer, but he was ignored. After about an hour of trying to assert their right of entry, the Lightners returned to the western side of the checkpoint.

Meanwhile, General Clay had been notified, and he came at once to the checkpoint, ordered two jeeps with armed soldiers as passengers, set up a convoy of one jeep ahead and one behind Lightner's car, and sent it off through the East Berlin control point without stopping. After the convoy had driven 100 yards or so into East Berlin, it turned around and returned per the General's instructions. The right of Allied access to East Berlin, in political terms, had been asserted.

Reaction was swift. A dozen unmarked Soviet tanks moved into East Berlin—the first, incidentally, which we had seen in East Berlin—and bivouacked in a vacant lot a few blocks from the Friedrichstrasse crossing point. Clay at once ordered US tanks to be

stationed daily along Friedrichstrasse near Checkpoint Charlie. Two or three times, between 23 and 27 October, Clay dispatched US Mission officers into East Berlin. They had strict orders not to show any identity documents, and, when they were blocked by the East Berlin guards, proceeded through the checkpoint in convoy with jeeps manned by armed soldiers, then immediately returned to West Berlin.

Late in the afternoon of 27 October, just after the US tanks had withdrawn to their nighttime bivouac area at nearby Templehof Airfield, the unmarked tanks appeared in Friedrichstrasse and deployed in a blocking pattern near the East Berlin checkpoint. The US tanks were quickly ordered back to their station at Checkpoint Charlie, and a nightlong confrontation ensued.

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By the next morning, the Soviets were finding the standoff embarrassing. Around 10:30 a.m. young German girls appeared, presented bouquets of flowers to the Soviet tank crews "to thank them for defending the Republic," and the tanks withdrew, as did the US tanks shortly thereafter. The first direct US-Soviet confrontation was over, with Clay the clear victor.

Soviet responsibility had been demonstrated to the world, but the Wall remained. Almost all East Germans were forbidden to travel to the West, the ground-access routes between West Germany and Berlin remained vulnerable to East German/Soviet interdiction, and the Soviet threat to conclude a separate peace treaty with East Germany had not been withdrawn. The division of Germany appeared more permanent than ever before.

Intelligence Performance

Almost immediately after the Sector Border was closed, senior policymakers in Washington began asking why this "intelligence failure" had occurred. "The Wall" seemed to many by its very existence to be proof of failure, and perhaps that judgment still prevails. It would be rash to assert the contrary, but, more than 30 years after the event and despite all that has appeared in print about the Wall, misconceptions persist. And there are even some pertinent facts that may not be generally known.

Some commentators on this subject seem to concentrate their charge of failure upon the fact that intelligence did not provide in advance the precise date and time the border would be cordoned off. If one accepts that narrow definition, intelligence did fail.

But from the time of Krushchev's "ultimatum" in November 1958 to August 1961, there had been a steady flow of analytical reporting from Berlin Base addressed to senior Agency levels, including the DCI, pointing out that the political objective of the USSR was to transform East Germany into a sovereign state, which would logically require imposition of strict controls at what it would proclaim to be an "international" border—the Berlin Sector Border.

Letters to the DCI

A number of insightful analyses of the Berlin situation were sent to Headquarters by the Berlin Base Chief, Dave Murphy, using the "Monthly Letter to the DCI" as a means of bringing his observations and conclusions to the attention of senior levels of the Agency. At that time, every Chief of Station or Base wrote a letter each month addressed to the DCI, which was always seen by the Area Division Chief, the Office of the Deputy Director for Operations, and the staff of the DCI. That staff often sent the letter, or extracts, to the DCI himself.

In his May 1960 letter to the DCI, more than a year before the "Wall," Murphy made a prescient analysis of Khrushchev's objectives and his likely actions to achieve them, predicting that those actions would include creating an "international" frontier between East and West Berlin.[4] He wrote:

> "A separate treaty between the Soviet Union and the 'GDR' opens a Pandora's box of possibilities insofar as access to West Berlin from West Germany is concerned. We are inclined to

doubt, however, that the Soviets will permit their East German 'gauleiters' to interfere with access to a degree that could risk hostilities. A more likely result of a separate peace treaty will be the creation of an 'international' frontier between East and West Berlin. This would provide the SED regime for the first time with a 'legal' basis for eliminating the present uncontrolled movement across the sector borders. In so doing they would not only reduce the refugee flow to insignificant proportions but would also prevent the exposure of thousands of East Berliners and Zone residents to the 'demoralizing' influences of West Berlin. This is without doubt the East German regime's most important single objective and one which is shared by the Soviets. Unless the constant drain of refugees can be stopped and until 'GDR' citizens are no longer able to draw moral and spiritual sustenance from visits to West Berlin however brief, it will be impossible to achieve the total communization of East Germany."

A few months later, in late October 1960, Murphy's letter to the DCI, in addition to describing further instances of "salami" tactics in Berlin, highlighted problems facing the Western Allies in trying to devise effective countermeasures to dissuade the Soviets and East Germans from imposing travel controls on West Berlin residents, controls which reflected unfavorably upon the ability of the Allies to protect them. Murphy also stressed the importance of holding the Soviets responsible for the measures allegedly being taken by the East Germans, and of insisting that the Soviets deal directly with the Allies on Berlin issues:

"The East Germans have made permanent their 30 August controls on West Germans wishing to enter East Berlin. They have also declared that West Germans and West Berliners wishing to visit the West Berlin exclave of Steinstuecken must submit to similar controls. Finally, the East Germans, backed up by the Soviets, Poles and Czechs, no longer recognize as valid West German passports in the possession of West Berliners wishing to transit the GDR to the Soviet Bloc . . . The net effect of these actions has been to lend considerable weight to Walter Ulbricht's claim that Berlin is their capital and that they have the right to control traffic to and within their capital as they see fit. Allied protests both on the Berlin and Moscow levels have been rebuffed by the Soviets, who fully support the East German position."

Finding protests of no value, and considering that a serious situation had arisen, the American Embassy in Bonn urged reprisals. First, an attempt was made to withhold travel documents from East Germans desiring to travel to West European nations not recognizing the GDR. However, there are loopholes in this and NATO nations have not agreed to plug them with respect to commercial travellers if this means a loss in trade. Next, West Germany responded to additional American urging by several measures aimed at interzonal trade, including cancellation of the current agreement. However, West German business circles have made it clear that they expect NATO to follow suit. So far NATO nations and Great Britain in particular have been reluctant to push economic sanctions as reprisals because they do not feel that East German actions to date warrant such severe measures.

While we are in full agreement with the Embassy on the gravity of the present situation, we do not believe reprisals will dissuade the East Germans from their present course. In our view they will continue harassment tactics against Berlin, and will concentrate on disrupting the commercial and industrial life of the city.

The only thing that can stop this gradual deterioration of the situation is determined Allied action of a type which forces the Soviets to resume the 'dialogue' on the Berlin question directly with the Allies and does not permit them to disclaim any responsibility for Berlin. To do this we must appear ready to take direct action on an issue which touches a Soviet nerve and would require Soviet intervention if

such action were taken. We think the one thing which concerns the Soviets and certainly the East Germans the most is our continued insistence on the Four-Power status for all of Berlin. Consequently, if the East Germans extend their sector controls to include West Berliners and forbid them to enter East Berlin, the Allies should consider direct action to insure freedom of circulation throughout a city for which they continue to bear responsibility even though the Soviets disclaim any such responsibility."

Murphy recognized that the "Right of Free Circulation" had pretty much been allowed to lapse since the Soviets withdrew from the Quadripartite Kommandatura in 1948. But his intention was to sound once again a warning to Headquarters that permitting the East Germans to institute controls on the Sector Border would raise doubts in the minds of the West Berliners about Allied ability to ward off East German harassment, not only of access routes but also in other matters affecting the prosperity and stability of West Berlin. He concluded:

" . . . the West Berliners will become more and more convinced that the Allies are unwilling to take any action at any time . . . *We seem to forget that we can only remain in Berlin if we enjoy the full confidence of the West Berliners.* That confidence is still there but it has slipped during the last month of 'salami' tactics. We cannot long delay taking definitive action, and it might be best if we looked ahead on this one and chose the issue which we feel most confident would bring the Soviets back into the act."

And in April 1961, Murphy's letter pointed out the growing problems in East Germany created by the mounting numbers of persons fleeing to West Berlin:

"Events of the past month indicate that both the Soviets and East Germans are still anxious to resolve what from their point of view is an increasingly onerous Berlin problem. The most exasperating manifestation of this problem, the refugee flow, continues at a level higher than last year. On Good Friday and Holy Saturday alone over 2,500 refugees registered at Marienfelde, and a total of 5,000 is expected by Easter Monday evening. The impact of this flow was noted in speeches during the 12th Plenum of the SED. Bruno Leuschner, the head of the State Planning Commission, in a very frank review of economic shortcomings cited the declining labor force as a major problem inhibiting the growth of the East German economy. Walter Ulbricht also referred to the refugee problem and called upon the party to investigate all cases of 'flight from the republic' to determine the causes. Ulbricht then went on to urge action on the Berlin question, and in terms reminiscent of the 1959 and 1960 propaganda campaigns, attacked West Berlin 'espionage and subversive organizations.' References of this type and attacks on the presence and activities of the Federal Republic in West Berlin were more vehement than anything we have heard since the summer of 1960."

Misjudging Moscow

Khrushchev may have been keeping his options open in April 1961 with respect to what move he would make, but the steadily increasing flow of refugees to West Berlin was making it inevitable that effective controls would be imposed on the Sector Border. In the first quarter of 1961, 34,000 refugees registered in West Berlin, and the total was rising every day; in July 1961 alone, as panic spread throughout East Germany, a total of 30,000 were registered.

In retrospect, it is rather curious that in springtime 1961, US policy planners in Washington, Bonn and Berlin were attracted to the idea that the East German Government would not be permitted by the Soviets to close the Sector Border, and came up with the idea that, instead, the border between the "Soviet Zone," i.e., between East Germany and East Berlin, would be closed. This "solution" perhaps was found appealing because it would not violate the rights of the Western Allies. But it ignored the central point of Khruschev's political objective, which was to establish a sovereign "GDR" with East Berlin as its capital. It also ignored the fact that, as a Communist state, East Germany had a centrally directed, planned

economy, whose government offices were located in East Berlin, which would mean that there would be constant traffic from East Germany to East Berlin, whence they could flee to West Berlin, unless the Sector Border was controlled. Nor did the idea address the already critical need felt by the East Germans to reduce the refugee flow, which could only be achieved by effective controls of the Sector Border.

Nonetheless, to a surprising degree, the idea that the East Berlin Zone Border would be closed tended to cloud discussion among US officials about likely Soviet moves. There seemed to be a great reluctance to accept control of the Sector Border as a real possibility.

An Intelligence Gap

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But the Berlin Base analysis quoted above clearly stating that the Sector Border might be closed had not had any visible effect in Washington, either; National Intelligence Estimates concerning the Berlin crisis published between January and July 1961 did not address this possibility.

Whatever the case, messages based on field opinion which served mainly to alert Headquarters to a possible event would not have the status of firm intelligence on Soviet intentions. The question persisted: why "all those US, British, French and German agencies" which had been running spies in East Germany for so many years failed to notice preparations for building the Wall? At least they might have noticed the massive amount of building materials needed to construct the Wall. And what about all those troops which were moved into Berlin to block the border?

Those questions arose from a misconception of what actually happened. No agency saw those vast quantities of building materials before 13 August, and for quite a while after that date, because no unusual quantities of concrete block—for a city in which many buildings were under construction—were lying about in East Berlin. They were not seen because they were not there.

Difficult to Detect

The "Wall" that went up on 13 August was a few strands of barbed wire strung from concrete posts. All the material necessary to cordon off the Sector Border—the 27-mile length of which was also guarded by hundreds of East German Army troops during the initial stages—all the barbed wire and all the concrete posts needed for the first, temporary fencing, could be and were brought in the same trucks which transported the troops to the scene. Those troops came from garrisons in East Germany, far from Berlin. It was Saturday night, so the likelihood that a patrol of one of the Allied Military Missions in East Germany might come across the convoys was remote, as the Military Missions generally stayed in their homes in West Berlin on weekends.

Moreover, at any time, day or night, on any day of the week, Soviet and East German military convoys were underway somewhere in East Germany, engaged in training exercises. In the small geographic area of East Germany there were 20 Soviet divisions, more than 300,000 troops. There were 75,000 East German troops in six divisions. And there were also the "Ready Police," which looked very much like military units and indeed included many former soldiers in its ranks who had already completed the maximum permissible term of 6-years' active duty in the East German Army. Thus it was possible to carry out a large-scale movement of East German troops at night, especially on a Saturday evening, without much likelihood that it would be seen as out of the ordinary.

On 13 August a number of Berlin Base officers talked to a few of these soldiers along the Sector Border, and found some in the more remote and rural areas of the border who did not even know they were in Berlin. And as for building a wall, in many of the rural areas the guards did not even put up fence posts during the first days, relying instead on

concertina-style coils of razor-sharp barbed wire laid out along the border. Construction of the Wall did not commence for several days, and work on the original 6-foot-high wall went on for many months.

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Penkovskiy's Knowledge

Publication of *The Penkovskiy Papers* in 1965 gave rise to another misconception. Oleg Penkovskiy was the GRU colonel who was the most valuable penetration of the Soviet Union in the post-World War II era. He was arrested late in 1962, tried and executed in mid-1963. *The Penkovskiy Papers* includes the statement that he had "learned about the Berlin closing four days before the Soviet Government actually closed it off."[6] Penkovskiy, however, had just returned to Moscow the same day he learned of the Soviet plan—10 August—after having been in London since 18 July. Communication with Penkovskiy in Moscow was very risky, and in this instance he did not initiate the means he had for calling an emergency meeting. As a result, his knowledge that the Soviets intended to close the Sector Border on 13 August was not received until well after the fact.

The authors of *The Spy Who Saved the World*, a more detailed account of the Penkovskiy case published in 1992, state that he did not report that information until 23 August, when he met Greville Wynne in Paris. They add their opinion (in 1992!) that: "had President Kennedy known of Krushchev's intentions, he could have undermined the Soviet action, possibly forcing them to abort it by exposing the plan to build the wall and, at least, alerting the Germans."[7]

That hypothesis is at least open to doubt, in view of Krushchev's political objectives and the need to stop the flight of East Germans to the West. The President had made a thorough study of the Berlin situation following his confrontation with Krushchev in Vienna in June. He also had the benefit of Penkovskiy's reporting, which had contributed significantly to reducing the estimate of the Soviet long-range missile capabilities and therefore of the threat of nuclear attack on the US. The President took steps to increase the strength of conventional forces in all four services, and he put in motion preparations to increase the US military contingent in Europe.

On 25 July 1961, in a speech to alert the US public to the seriousness of the Berlin crisis, Kennedy at the same time threw down the gauntlet to Krushchev, declaring that the US was in West Berlin by right, and would remain so long as the freedom of West Berlin was threatened. The speech—with such statements as " . . . the solemn vow each of us gave to West Berlin in time of peace will not be broken in time of danger . . . Today, the endangered frontier of freedom runs through divided Berlin . . . " alarmed many in West Berlin and the Federal

Republic of Germany because of the absence of mention of East Berlin. But it was by far the strongest commitment to the protection of West Berlin that any Ally had made since the airlift.

The President saw that the claim to free access and to presence in West Berlin were fundamental Allied rights on which no concessions had been made throughout the occupation; likewise, he understood the potential for adverse impact upon the credibility of US commitments if concessions were made. The claim of Western Allied rights in East Berlin, on the other hand, had been de facto abandoned since Soviet withdrawal from the Quadripartite Kommandatura more than a dozen years earlier. Weighing all factors, the President made his decision: he committed the US to uphold the freedom of West Berlin, setting the policy which preserved that freedom another 30 years, until Germany was finally reunified.

Reviewing Western Policy

Charges persist that the West's policy on Berlin was wrong. Perhaps no firm conclusion can ever be drawn, but any assessment of that policy should include recognition of the temper of the times. This was the first confrontation in which both sides were nuclear powers. The members of the Western Alliance were persuaded of Moscow's power and of their own military weakness, and NATO defense plans called for almost immediate resort to nuclear war. The Western Allies—all three—did not see closing of the Sector Border as an issue over which they would go to war. In their perception the freedom of West Berlin would only be threatened if the ground-access routes were cut off. On that issue there could be no compromise, as Dean Acheson had emphatically advised President Kennedy.

In fact, as events demonstrated, no plans had been made to deal with the contingency that the Sector Border might be closed, beyond deciding that the Western Allies would not intervene. On 13 August 1961, East Berlin and East Germany were physically cut off from the West. The dividing line between Eastern and Western Europe, which the Soviets began drawing shortly after World War II with the takeover by the communist party first of Hungary, then of Czechoslovakia, had now been formally extended to include East Germany, a division which would last some 30 years. But throughout that time the Western Allies succeeded in defending the freedom of West Berlin by maintaining the Allied rights established in World War II. A Soviet takeover of West Berlin was averted. If the West had known, authoritatively, precisely, and well in advance of the action the Soviets would take, could the Berlin Wall have been prevented without war? I leave it to the historians—past, present, and future—to debate that question.

NOTES

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2. This order was consistent with the prevailing assessment of the US Joint Chiefs that direct confrontation of the US and Soviet military risked triggering nuclear war. The JCS held to the belief that conventional forces available to NATO would not be able to halt a Soviet attack on Western Europe, and defense plans accordingly called for virtually immediate recourse to nuclear weapons. Generals Maxwell Taylor and Matthew Ridgeway had each resigned his post as JCS Chairman when they were unable to gain adoption of the doctrine of "flexible response" and the buildup of conventional forces which that policy would require. President Kennedy inclined to their view, because immediate recourse to nuclear arms would not offer much opportunity for negotiations to try to avoid military hostilities, and he decided to start building up US conventional forces. In his first State of the Union address, he called for an increase in airlift capabilities essential to projecting the power of conventional forces. At the end of March 1961, he

asked Congress for an additional appropriation to add to conventional capabilities. And, after the failure of the Bay of Pigs operation, he appointed General Taylor to his personal staff as adviser on NATO and Germany, and through him thereafter took a direct hand in events in Berlin. The day the Soviets closed the Sector Border, however, US defense plans still called for rapid resort to nuclear weapons, and there was great apprehension among many policy-level officials in Washington that the Soviets might block the West Germany-Berlin access route and precipitate nuclear war. In his book, *From Hiroshima to Glasnost*, Paul Nitze wrote (page 197) that "Our NATO contingency plans called for sending a small military force down the Autoban to Berlin and, if resisted, moving to the nuclear response envisioned in MC 14/2." Nitze further states (page 205) "To my mind, the Berlin crisis of 1961 was a time of greater danger of nuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union than the Cuban missile crisis of 1962."

3. Jean Smith: *The Defense of Berlin*, p. 286

4. [redacted]

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5. [redacted]

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6. *The Penkovskiy Papers*. Doubleday; Garden City, New York; 1965; 411 pp.

7. Jerrold L. Schecter and Peter Deriaban. *The Spy Who Saved the World*. Charles Scribner's Sons; New York; 1992; p. 226.

This article is classified SECRET.