

The estimates of the Central Intelligence Agency during the second Berlin Crisis

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Abstract

After the Second World War, the city of Berlin, like Germany, was divided into four zones of occupation, with the Allied powers taking the west part of the city and the Soviets taking the eastern section. Located 177 kilometers from the border with West Germany and deep inside of East Germany, the western sector of Berlin became an island of capitalism and democracy within the communist German Democratic Republic. Holding an important strategic role, Berlin had been a constant source of tension in East-West relations during the Cold War. After the leader of the Soviet Union, Joseph Stalin, tried to blockade the Western occupied sectors by closing off all the land routes into the city, his successor, Nikita Khrushchev, started a new crisis over Berlin by forcing the West to transform West Berlin into a demilitarized „free city” and recognize the GDR. This paper examines the CIA’s view of the events during the Berlin Crisis that culminated with the building of the Wall,

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highlighting how the US intelligence agency analyzed Soviet behavior. The estimates of the CIA provided a new perspective on the Berlin question, the anticipation by the CIA of the possible tactics that the communist regime could carry out in Berlin offering new details about the West's perception of the Soviets. The US intelligence agency was not only a secret service of a state whose role was to collect information but, moreover, it was an essential part of the US political apparatus at a time when a good knowledge of the opponent's intentions could radically change future political decisions.

The division of Germany and the role of the Central Intelligence Agency in Berlin

With the defeat of Nazi Germany, the main purpose of the Allied powers was to contain and prevent renewed German aggression. In the first discussions that occurred between the Big Three, soviet leader Joseph Stalin, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and U.S. President, Franklin D. Roosevelt, numerous schemes circulated for the post-war order, envisaging a change in the balance of power in Europe, the breakup of German industrial power and the possible dismemberment of Germany.

Holding an important strategic position within the German state, the capital of Germany, Berlin, was the administrative, political and economic center of the Reich. With a population of 4,338, 756 inhabitants before the war, 600. 000 of them working in factories, the city produced almost a tenth of the total German production. After five years of war, the city's population reached 2,807,405 inhabitants, 40% of the buildings were destroyed along with electricity, public transport, and sewerage systems.¹ Nevertheless, the German capital continued to

¹ Frederick Taylor, *The Berlin Wall: A World Divided 1961-1989*, New York, Harper Collins, 2008, p. 4.

have more than a symbolic value in European geopolitics. Aware of the city's potential, British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, believed that the possibility of capturing and controlling Berlin would be an important strategic measure after the end of the war, playing a key role in limiting post-war Soviet influence. The Americans, however, did not initially notice what Berlin represented, the commander of the United States forces, Dwight D. Eisenhower, refusing to involve the army and risk losses for a military objective that he considered secondary.²

After years in which the Nazi armed forces spread violence throughout the European continent, the most destructive war ever fought has reached home to the Reich. The Soviet army occupied Berlin in April 1945, imposing unilateral control for ten weeks, until the arrival of the other Allied troops, which in turn occupied a sector of Berlin. Defeated and without a government or any other authority that could have accepted responsibility for maintaining order, the country was going to be splitting into occupation and its capital was to be administered by a separate regime of joint occupation.

The official division of Germany into control zones took place on 5th of June, 1945, with the signing of the Berlin Declaration by which the four commanders of the Allied powers, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Sir Bernard L. Montgomery, Georgi Zhukov, and Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, assumed the supreme authority over the German territories. The United States occupied the Southern part of Germany, Great Britain the Northwest, France the Southwest, and the USSR the Eastern part.³

² William Stivers; Donald A. Carter, *The City Becomes a Symbol: The U.S Army in the Occupation of Berlin 1945-1949*, Washington D.C, Center of Military History U.S. Army, 2017, p. 12.

³ „Declaration Regarding the Defeat of Germany and the Assumption of Supreme Authority by Allied Powers; June 5, 1945”, in *The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy* <https://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/ger01.asp>.

At the same time, the city of Berlin was to have a special status within the occupied German state, now devoid of sovereignty. Thus, Berlin was initially divided into three sectors: the British and American forces took control of the Western half of the city, while the Soviet Union occupied the eastern half. At the insistence of the Anglo-Americans, a fourth occupation sector was created in the Northwestern part of the city, under French jurisdiction. Each of the occupying powers appointed a commander for its sector, which was also part of the Inter-Allied Control Council, which exercised the administrative control of the city. This Council was known as the Kommandatura.⁴

Despite the semblance of unity over Berlin, the wartime coalition was already beginning to fracture. The city of Berlin, located within the soviet sector and with its Western area occupied by the Americans, British and French, seemed to be a Western enclave within the socialist bloc since, shortly after imposing control, the Soviets began to transform East Germany into something similar to the satellite states of Eastern Europe. As Berlin remained a territory surrounded by the USSR, the Allies were dependent on the Soviets for access to the city, and the lack of a guarantee on land access remained a weak point in the occupation of West Berlin by the Western powers. Given this vulnerable position of the city, there was no formal agreement guaranteeing ground access of the Allied powers to the city. Only concerns regarding aviation safety led to the conclusion of an agreement between the four states of the Allied Control Commission on the 30th of

⁴ Giles Macdonough, *After the Reich: The Brutal History of the Allied Occupation*, New York, Basic Books, 2009, p. 199.

November, 1945, establishing several air corridors linking Berlin to Hamburg, Hanover, and Frankfurt.⁵

So, after the inter-Allied discussions on initiating monetary reform inside Germany failed and the Moscow's growing intransigence within the Kommandatura led to its withdrawal from the Control Commission⁶, the tension between the Soviet Union and the Western powers started to rise in Berlin. When the Soviets imposed the Berlin Blockade, on the 24th of June, 1948, which last almost 11 months and witnessed the greatest airlift of material the world has ever seen, the line dividing the East and West Berlin has become, both physically and symbolically, the front line of the East-West conflict. Even though West Berlin was incorporated into the newly formed Federal Republic of Germany in May 1949, its status continued to be a thorny issue for many years.

Because it was a democratic enclave inside the communist bloc, Berlin was at the center of the intelligence war between the United States and the Soviet Union. In July 1945, with the Western occupation, American intelligence services were settled in the city. Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the United States intelligence agency that operated during the Second World War, landed at Berlin's Tempelhof Airport ready to monitor the possible German revenge. What they reported were checks on Germans who were considered worthy of serving in the future German government, the activities of the new trade unions, actions by the local officials, and occasional acts of violence by Nazis were hard to catch.⁷

⁵ „Control Council Approval of Air Corridors, 30 November 1945”, in *Politics and Government in Germany, 1944-1994: Basic Documents*, New York, Berghahn Books, 1995, p. 10 <https://bit.ly/2AT4aWy>.

⁶ Roger Miller G., *To Save a City: The Berlin Airlift, 1948-1949*, Washington D.C., U.S Government Printing Office, 1998, p. 18.

⁷ David E. Murphy; Serghei, A. Kondrasev; George, Bailey, *Battleground Berlin: CIA vs. KGB in the Cold War*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1997, p. 11.

Made up of few professionals and with limited administrative resources, at the beginning of settling in Berlin, the American intelligence system seemed to have an unstable future. But the transformation, in October 1945, of the OSS into the Strategic Services Unit (SSU), which would be assimilated in 1946 by the Central Intelligence Group (CIG) and, unlike previous organizations of its kind, was granted the authority to conduct independent research and analysis, changed the character of the intelligence services. Within months of its creation, CIG became the nation's primary agency for strategic warning and management of clandestine activities abroad. President of the United States, Harry S. Truman soon recognized the need for a new, fully functional post-war intelligence organization. So, in 1947 he signed the National Security Act, establishing the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)⁸, the first U.S. civilian secret service to operate in peacetime.

The CIA was organized into various departments that closely monitored the activities of the adversaries. The Office of Special Operations was responsible for collecting intelligence, and the Office for Policy Coordination was the hidden arm of the agency. The two merged in August 1952 to become the Directorate of Plans. Thus, in the early 1950s, the CIA was separated into four core components: Directorate of Operations/Plans, Directorate of Intelligence, Directorate of Science & Technology, and Directorate of Support.⁹

An important role during the Cold War was played by the Office of Reports and Estimates which produced short-term evaluations of events on the political

⁸ „History of CIA”, in *Central Intelligence Agency* <https://www.cia.gov/legacy/cia-history/>

⁹ Richard C.S Trahair; Rober L. Miller, *Encyclopedia of Cold War Espionage, Spies, and Secret Operations*, New York, Enigma Books, 2004, p. 53.

scene, current reports, and even some predictions. This activity was later conducted by the Office of Current Intelligence. Their reports about the political climate in East Berlin, as well as the alleged tactics of Soviets which the CIA was trying to anticipate, provided a relatively clear picture of possible events that could take place. A report of the CIA, from 1948, confirms the CIA's ability to carefully analyze a problem and sometimes manage to predict its consequences. On the 16th of March, 1948, CIA Director Richard Helms sent President Truman a memorandum examining the recent Soviet action to reorganize the East German government and the possibility of the Soviets forcing the occupying Western powers to leave Berlin. As the Soviet Union expects the US, Great Britain, and France not to leave the city, it would probably use military means which may include blocking transport and travel to Berlin, a „malfunction“ of electricity, and a reduction in the supply of food coming from the Soviet zone, among others.¹⁰ Two months before the Soviets imposed the Berlin Blockade, the CIA was able to anticipate how the Soviets would react to the introduction of the new currencies by the Allied powers.

The outbreak of the second Berlin Crisis

On the 10th of November, 1958, Nikita Khrushchev, the First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from 1953, declared in front of a group of Polish communists, come to Moscow to celebrate the 41st anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, that he intended to denounce a series of agreements

¹⁰ „Memorandum for the President 16 March 1948“ in Donald P. Steury (ed.), *On the Front Lines of the Cold War: Documents on the Intelligence War in Berlin, 1946 to 1961*, Washington, D.C., CIA History Staff, Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1999, p. 145.

concluded after the Second World War which had been the reason for the fragile stability in Europe. He wanted, unilaterally, to change the quadripartite status of Berlin, withdrawing all military forces from the city and normalizing the situation in Germany, which could only be done by signing a peace treaty. The Soviet leader also considered that German militarism, which wanted to be eradicated after the war, was now more present than ever since West Germany had joined NATO and owned the American missiles that could be equipped with nuclear warheads.¹¹ His speech was followed by a diplomatic note sent to the Western powers, on the 27th of November. In his note, Khrushchev stated that if the Allied powers do not start negotiations with the Soviet Union for the preparation of a peace treaty with the German Democratic Republic, which Khrushchev had recognized in 1955, and transform West Berlin into a demilitarized free city within six months, the Soviets will hand over their responsibilities regarding Berlin, especially the control over the western access routes between West Germany and West Berlin, to the East-German government.¹²

West Berlin posed a threat to the Soviets and East Germans. First of all, after the border between East and West Germany had been closed in 1952, West Berlin became the crossing point to West Germany. If anyone wanted to leave the GDR, but he did not dare to cross the new defended frontier, he just had to get to Berlin. Between 1952 and 1953, 513, 783 people left GDR because the living

¹¹ „Address by Premier Khrushchev at a Soviet-Polish meeting, on Germany and Berlin, November 10, 1958” in *Documents on Germany, 1944-1959: background documents on Germany, 1944-1959, and a chronology of political developments affecting Berlin, 1945-1956*, Washington D.C., United States Government Printing Office, 1959, p.310 <https://bit.ly/3ds1Nra>.

¹² „Note from the Soviet Foreign Ministry to the American Ambassador at Moscow (Thompson), regarding Berlin, November 27, 1958” in *Documents on Germany, 1944-1959...* <https://bit.ly/2Yuffqs>.

standards of the East Germans had fallen substantially since 1947.¹³ Economic problems, caused by the high spending on the heavy industry sector, led to an East German deficit of 700 million marks in 1952.¹⁴ The plan of the East-German leader, Walter Ulbricht, *Aufbau des Sozialismus* (Building socialism), determined the increase of the refugee flow. His plan, which he wanted to be completed by 1965, was aimed at overtaking West Germany in the production of consumer goods, improving the economy to which the USSR contributes by canceling annual payments for the maintenance of Soviet occupation forces, and the introduction of the communist doctrine in schools.¹⁵ Because some professions were much more exposed to the political sanctions than others, repression of the intellectuals and the middle class led to their exodus to the West. In 1958, more than 250 professors, 2 393 teachers, and 813 doctors, which accounted for almost 8% of all GDR doctors¹⁶, left the East and this led not only to an economic gap but also to a weakening of the quality of the education and the health systems. Even with the adoption of the new GDR passport law on the 11th of December, 1957, which introduced severe punishments for the *Republikflucht* (flight from the Republic), West Berlin continued to be the main gateway.

Secondly, besides the refugee problem which caused a drain on the East German economy, West Berlin was a base of espionage. Due to its open border with the East, recruiting and leading spies was an easy task because any East German or Soviet could reach West Berlin. For a period of time, there were enough

¹³ Manfred Wilke, *The path to the Berlin Wall: Critical Stages in the History of Divided Germany*, New York, Berghahn Books, 2014, p. 49.

¹⁴ Frederick Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

¹⁵ „Current Weekly Intelligence Summary: The internal situation in East Germany, 11 December 1958”, in Donald P. Steury (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 422.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 423.

streets that allowed free movement between the two halves of the city, only at some of the largest streets being installed checkpoints.¹⁷ Many of whom arrived in West Berlin were to be recruited as intelligence agents. Although they often agreed to spy for ideological reasons, they also accepted because they were granted material benefits such as the ability to obtain a visa and work in another state. Khrushchev and Ulbricht wanted to put to end the „subversive work of the West Berlin espionage and sabotage centers“.¹⁸ For them, West Berlin was a „center of hostile activity against the GDR and other socialist countries“, a threat to the stability of East Germany.

To discuss the issues raised by the ultimatum, the Western powers met in Paris in December 1958. The foreign ministers of the Allied powers reaffirmed their determination to maintain their position and rights in Berlin, considering it unacceptable to transform West Berlin into a so-called „free city“.¹⁹

Meanwhile, CIA analysts took very seriously any apparent attempts to undermine the Western rights in Berlin. A report of CIA, from December 1958, asserted that the Soviet leader would probably intend to be cautious, trying to avoid a military conflict with the Allied powers, but, at the same time, he would be ready to take advantage of any sign of weakness that Westerners would have.²⁰ Moreover, according to the report, the Soviets, almost sure, did not expect the

¹⁷ Paul Maddrell, *Spying on Science: Western Intelligence in Divided Germany, 1945-1961*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 122.

¹⁸ „Walter Ulbricht's speech at the Moscow Conference, 3 August 1961“, in *Digital Archive International History Declassified, Berlin Wall Collection*, Woodrow Wilson Center <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116211>

¹⁹ „Four-Power communiqué on Berlin, December 14, 1958“, in *Documents on Germany, 1944-1959...*, p.333 <https://bit.ly/2NzM7bf>

²⁰ „Special National Intelligence Estimate: Soviet Objectives in the Berlin Crisis“ in Donald P. Steury (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 429.

Western powers to accept the proposal from the 27th of November to transform Berlin into a „demilitarized free city“, some forms of negotiation with Westerners being possible before offering their functions to the East Germans. Thus, according to the CIA, it was unlikely that the USSR would make any hasty move and it was possible for the Soviets to propose a summit, where the Soviets would try to get the Allied powers to accept agreements that would include some features that seem more attractive to the Western opinion, like a demilitarized city of Berlin under United Nations guarantees, perhaps even with a UN observer present in the city.²¹

What followed was in line with the expectations of the CIA. On the 10th of January, 1959, USSR sent a note to the Allied powers in which Khrushchev withdrew his ultimatum and called for a conference, to take place in Warsaw or Prague, to conclude a German peace treaty and discuss the situation in Berlin. This showed the Soviet's intentions to negotiate. A draft peace treaty was attached to the note and included 11 basic stipulations. Among them were a neutral Germany, the recognition of the two German states by the West, the participation of the two German states in the negotiations, withdrawal of troops from Germany, a ban on Germany to produce and possess nuclear weapons or other instruments of mass destruction and to participate in a military alliance aimed at one of the signatory countries, and, finally, the demilitarization of the free city of Berlin until the unification of the German state.²²

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 430.

²² „Current Intelligence Weekly Summary: The Berlin Situation, 15 January 1959“, in Donald P. Steury (ed), *op. cit.*, p. 435.

The president of the United States, Dwight D. Eisenhower, responded to the note as Khrushchev had partially hoped. The Soviet leader wanted to prove, also, in a summit with the democratic powers, the fact that Western views on the failure of the post-Stalinist leadership were false and the new leadership was firm and had more unity and support than ever before.²³ The American president signed the agreement to hold a meeting with the four foreign ministers in Geneva, in which the representatives of East and West Germany would participate as observers.

The Geneva Conference turned out to be a failure due to the contradictory opinions that the four powers had. During the conference, the CIA tried to estimate what would be the actions of the Soviets if the Geneva Conference would end without any result. According to a report from June 1959, if the Soviets allowed the conference to end without a final decision on Berlin it is because the USSR believes that a period of additional pressure would determine the Western powers to make substantial concessions.²⁴ One of the measures that the Soviets could take to enforce these pressures was, in the opinion of the intelligence agency, concluding a peace treaty with the GDR and, simultaneous, transfer of access control in Berlin to East Germans and, also, applying some access restrictions to test the determination of Western powers and increase tensions. Moscow, even before Khrushchev's ultimatum, had made some moves to hand over access control to the East German authorities, all railway installations being already owned by the GDR government in 1959. Furthermore, civilian traffic was

²³ Vladislav M. Zubok, *A failed empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev*, Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 2007, p. 106.

²⁴ „Soviet Tactics on Berlin, 11 June 1959”, in Donald P. Steury, *op. cit.*, p. 503.

completely under East German control, West Germans on their way to Berlin or coming from Berlin being forced to present their passport or ID card.²⁵ Therefore, the East Germans already had the approval of the Soviets to isolate West Berlin from the transport networks to limit travel from East Germany to the western sectors. Handing over the functions held by the USSR to the East German authorities by a treaty was ultimately only a formal matter.

Even if no agreement could be reached at Geneva, Khrushchev and President Eisenhower held a discussion at Camp David where they agreed to reopen negotiations on Berlin. During their meeting, the US president said that the United States did not want to perpetuate the occupation regime and although he did not know precisely how the Berlin question could be resolved, he had hoped to set up a friendly atmosphere in which negotiations could be conducted. The Soviet position on Berlin had created a difficult situation and, therefore, it was necessary to find a reasonable solution.²⁶ In turn, Khrushchev said that the Soviet Union did not want to take any unilateral action and that he wanted to solve the German problem together with the United States in the friendliest possible manner.²⁷

Khrushchev was offered a new opportunity to raise the issue of Berlin with Allied powers at a summit in Paris that brought together the Soviet leader, the American president, the British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan and the

²⁵ „Current Intelligence Weekly Summary: Communist tactics against West Berlin, 5 February 1959”, in Donald P. Steury (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 450-451.

²⁶ „Memorandum of Conversation, Camp David, September 26, 1959 ”, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958–1960, Volume X, Part 1, Eastern Europe Region; Soviet Union; Cyprus, Document 130*, Washington, D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office, 1993, p.464
<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v10p1/d130>

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 465.

president of France, Charles de Gaulle. But, once again, Khrushchev failed to make use of the opportunity. Eight months after Khrushchev's visit to the United States, an American U-2 spy plane was shot down, in the Ural Mountains, by the Soviet Air Forces while performing photographic aerial reconnaissance deep inside the Soviet territory. Just five days before the Paris summit, Eisenhower admitted, after initially denying it, that he had personally approved the U-2 flight with Garry Powers as its pilot because the secret actions of the Soviets made it impossible to assess Moscow's intentions and capabilities.²⁸ Questioning the integrity and peaceful intentions of the American president, Khrushchev decided to propose a six to eight-month postponement of the conference and to be resumed only after Eisenhower was no longer in power. The Soviets chose to publicize the U-2 incident being, undoubtedly, aware that this action could have consequences for the conference.²⁹ Khrushchev's decision to exploit the crash of the American spy plane had, however, several sources: first of all, it was a way to make the Americans give up leading the air reconnaissance missions to the USSR and, second of all, offered the Soviet leader the opportunity to confront his opponents and critics within the communist bloc. For instance, in late March and April, a Chinese publication wrote two major articles which were highly critical of Soviet foreign policy.³⁰ The fact that Khrushchev was negotiating with the Americans was in the view of the Chinese a „betrayal of communism“. Thus, for the Soviet leader,

²⁸ „Statement by the President regarding U-2 incident, May 11, 1960“ in *National Archives, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library* <https://www.eisenhowerlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/research/online-documents/u2-incident/5-11-60-statement-by-president.pdf>

²⁹ „Report Prepared in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, „Analysis of soviet behavior at the Conference“, in *FRUS, 1958–1960, Berlin Crisis, 1959–1960; Germany; Austria, Volume IX Document 195* <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v09/d195>

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 523.

it proved to be more important to maintain his position within the Party and his relations with China than to continue the conference.

In the spring of 1959, the CIA was trying to estimate what actions the Soviets might take if the summit ended without finding a solution to the Berlin problem. Because the CIA observed that Khrushchev had alternated between offers to negotiate over Berlin and threats of unilateral action, the agency considers that the Soviets would agree to extend the negotiations or, most likely, to sign a separate treaty with East Germany. After signing the peace treaty, the Soviets were unlikely to intend to block access to Berlin, as they were willing to alter Berlin's status by negotiating with Westerners. What Khrushchev would do was to impose some access conditions which, in the view of the Allies, was like denying their access to the city.³¹

Pressures of the East German regime in Berlin

After the Paris summit failed, Khrushchev allowed the East German authorities to launch a campaign aimed at raising tensions. After Walter Ulbricht declared that „West Berlin is located in the GDR and is part of its territory...“³², East Germans used a variety of means to create a state of insecurity in Berlin which reflected their claims to sovereignty over West Berlin. On the 29th of August 1960, the East German government adopted an order by which, from 30th of August to 4th of September, the West German citizens were allowed to enter East Berlin only

³¹ „Special National Intelligence Estimate: The Soviet Attitude and Tactics on the Berlin Problem, 22 March 1960“, in Donald P. Steury (ed), *op. cit.*, p. 523.

³² „Intelligence Report Prepared in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research: Increasing communist attention to Berlin, 25 august 1960“ in *The Foreign Relations of the United States* (hereafter FRUS, Vol. IX., p. 553 <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v09/d207>

if they were in possession of a valid visitor's permit.³³ These violations of the Agreements between the four powers were taken in the context of a meeting, in West Berlin, of the organizations from West Germany representing former prisoners of war and refugees. This meeting was considered by the communists as a „revanchist meeting“ which threatened the order and security of the population in the GDR.³⁴

The CIA expected the GDR to use its repressive actions to demonstrate that it could take action against West Berlin. Those actions could gradually weaken the ties between Berlin and the FRG as West Berliners begin to have doubts about the Allies' ability to withstand communist pressure.³⁵ But some of the actions that East-German authorities took did not always have the approval of the Soviet leader. On the 23rd of September 1960, Ulbricht announced that all Western diplomats accredited to the FRG must obtain permission from the GDR's Ministry of Foreign Affairs before entering either in the eastern sector of Berlin or in the other territories of the GDR.³⁶ Pursuing a policy of limited risk, in which they were using military threats to secure their political objectives, but would not go to war, according to the CIA analysis, the Soviets wanted to postpone some radical actions until the future negotiations would have been possible under a new American administration³⁷. Because of this, Khrushchev ordered Ulbricht to cancel the new

³³ „Decree of the German Democratic Republic Imposing a Five-Day Restriction on Entry of West German Citizens Into East Berlin, August 29, 1960“, in *Documents on Germany, 1944-1985*, Washington D.C., United States Government Printing Office, 1986, pp. 715-716. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015011724781&view=1up&seq=777>

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 715.

³⁵ David E. Murphy; Serghei A. Kondrashev; George Bailey, *op.cit.*, p. 335.

³⁶ Frederick Taylor, *op.cit.*, p. 121.

³⁷ „Current Intelligence Weekly Summary: Soviet Policy on Berlin and Germany“, in Donald P. Steury (ed), *op.cit.*, p. 546.

border regime. The restrictive measures in terms of traffic between West Berlin and the GDR could have caused West Germany to break economic relations with the East, and this would have had serious consequences for the already fragile economy of the German communist state.

During a meeting between the Soviet leader and Ulbricht, in November 1960, Khrushchev urged the East German leader to be patient. Asking Khrushchev what tactics should be adopted next year, the Soviet leader told Ulbricht that they would develop a tactic of gradual elimination of the Western powers from West Berlin, but without war.³⁸

Ulbricht felt that the East-German economics problems were getting worse too quickly to be postponed until the Soviet leader held talks with the new American president. Thus, during the winter, the East Germans continued to harass those who crossed the border. There were temporary closures of checkpoints, frequent checks, diversions at the sectoral border made to East Berliners working in the West.³⁹ Ulbricht's decision to act for solving the Berlin issue came even further after the SED Political Bureau approved the plan to set up a working group at the highest level, whose task was to develop strategies to „radically stop“ the flow of refugees. The East German leader had tasked three of his most loyal subordinates with this mission: General Secretary of the Socialist Unity Party, Erich Honecker, Minister for the Interior, Karl Maren, and head of the

³⁸ „Record of Meeting of Comrade N.S. Khrushchev with Comrade W. Ulbricht, November 30, 1960“, in *Digital Archive International History Declassified, Berlin Wall Collection, Woodrow Wilson Center* <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/112352.pdf?v=2022f4f0e3dc66274ecc8a6d9ecc5dc6>

³⁹ Frederick Taylor, *op.cit.*, p. 123.

East German Ministry for State Security, Erich Mielke.⁴⁰ Thus, it seemed that Ulbricht was ready to seal the border, needing only Khrushchev's word to act.

Analyzing what future measures could be taken to stop the increase in the number of East Germans leaving the GDR through Berlin, the CIA considered that it would be very difficult for East Germans to completely seal access to the western sectors. The border passed through streets, forests, plains, lakes, canals, and even Western enclaves in the territory of the Eastern area, which could make such a move ineffective. According to the agency, the East German police and border guards could be placed at strategic points, but it would have been impossible to completely close the demarcation line.⁴¹ Even though the East German authorities were already beginning to take steps to separate the transport system from West Berlin, and thus eliminate the traces of the dependence on the Western sectors, a total isolation from the West did not seem possible from the CIA's point of view.⁴²

A new US president, same Berlin question

During the electoral debates, John F. Kennedy stated that „the next President of the United States in his first year is going to be confronted with a very serious question on our defense of Berlin, our commitment to Berlin” and in „spring or late in the winter, we are going to face with the most serious Berlin crisis since 1949 or '50.”⁴³ Moreover, being asked if he would take military action to

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 141.

⁴¹ „Current Intelligence Weekly Summary: Communist Tactics against West Berlin”, in Donald P. Steury (ed), *op.cit.*, p. 452.

⁴² *Ibidem*.

⁴³ „Television Debates: Transcript: Second Debate, 7 October 1960”, in *Papers of John F. Kennedy. Pre-Presidential Papers. Presidential Campaign Files, 1960*, pp. 47-48. <https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/JFKCAMP1960/1052/JFKCAMP1960-1052-002>

defend Berlin, the next president said that the US has a contractual right to be in Berlin and a commitment to maintaining the freedom and independence of West Berlin.⁴⁴ Even if he somehow anticipated how the political climate would look like in 1961, by the time Kennedy began his presidential term, it had been three years since Khrushchev had issued his first ultimatum, and the passing of time began to gradually reduce the credibility of the Soviet leader's threat and the general sense of insecurity.

However, with the new US administration, Khrushchev has taken some conciliatory steps to create a favorable climate for future discussions about Berlin and Germany. So, immediately after the inauguration, the Soviet leader published the full and uncensored text of Kennedy's Inaugural Address in *Pravda* and *Izvestia*, reduced the jamming of the radio broadcasting network, *The Voice of America*, and released two American pilots whose RB-47 reconnaissance aircraft had been shot down in the summer of 1960 after straying into Soviet airspace.⁴⁵

In Khrushchev's view, the new US administration meant a new opportunity to resolve the situation in Berlin. Seeing that Kennedy had not yet arranged a future meeting for negotiations and thinking that it is necessary to recall the „abnormal“ situation in West Berlin as the West delayed resolving the German problem, the Soviet Union sent an aide-mémoire to the Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, Konrad Adenauer. In its diplomatic note, whose message was also addressed to Kennedy, the Soviet Union reiterated the danger of arming West Germany and of subversive activities taking place in the western part of

⁴⁴ „Television debates: Transcript: Third debate, 13 October 1960“, in *Papers of John F. Kennedy...*, p.6 <https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/JFKCAMP1960/1052/JFKCAMP1960-1052-004>

⁴⁵ Michael Beschloss, *The Crisis Years: Kennedy and Khrushchev, 1960-1963*, New York, Harper Collins, 1991, p. 73.

Berlin. It concluded that „either we move toward an ever more dangerous aggravation of relations between states, toward armed conflicts, or conclude a peace treaty.”⁴⁶ According to the note, the German problem must be resolved in 1961, before the elections in the FRG. The period following the elections would delay again the negotiation process, as was the case in the United States, where the organization of the new administration and the new duties postponed discussions on Berlin indefinitely on the political agenda. Using both threats and supplications, the Soviet Union was trying to show the benefits that a peace treaty could bring. For the Soviets, a peace treaty, guided by principles of peaceful coexistence, would eliminate mistrust of the Bonn policy in many countries of the world.⁴⁷

In April 1961, after observing the Soviet’s approach in the note sent to the FRG, the CIA stated, in The National Intelligence Estimate report, that, apparently, Khrushchev still hoped that if he kept in reserve the threat of a unilateral move, the Western fears of a showdown would induce the Allies to make concessions at the bargaining table.⁴⁸ Also, the agency estimated that in the relatively near future the USSR would present a formal demand for a renewal of negotiations on the question of a peace treaty for „the two Germanies” and a new status for Berlin, Khrushchev repeating what he had done in November 1958 and January 1959. A first step toward eliminating Allied occupation rights in West Berlin would be, according to the agency, an interim agreement which, at least by implication,

⁴⁶ „Aide-mémoire from the Soviet Union to the FRG concerning a German Peace Treaty and relates matters, February, 17, 1961”, in *Documents on Germany 1944-1985...*, p. 724. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015011724781&view=1up&seq=786&skin=2021>

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 725.

⁴⁸ „National Intelligence Estimate: Soviet short-term intentions regarding Berlin and Germany, April 25 1961”, in *FRUS, 1961-1963, Vol. XIV, Berlin Crisis, United States Government Printing Office*, Washington, 1993 p. 57. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v14/d20>

would put a time limit on the occupation rights. This outcome would be intended to lay the groundwork for later advances and a major gain for the Soviets.⁴⁹ However, the latest estimate was also influenced by Khrushchev's meeting with the US columnist Walter Lippmann. At the meeting, explaining alternative solutions to the Berlin problem, the soviet leader seemed to point out that an interim agreement would have been most likely. An agreement with both German states was the ideal solution, but he recognized that the West was unlikely to accept such a plan.⁵⁰

The failures of the Kennedy administration in Cuba and Laos made the Soviets believe that they could put the president to another test, in Berlin. Trying to anticipate what could be a possible evolution of the Berlin crisis, the CIA thought that Khrushchev's foreign policy, adopted with the inauguration of the new American president, could be the best indicator. On the one hand, Khrushchev has adopted a relatively moderate policy toward the US, actively sought to arrange an early meeting with Kennedy, but, on the other, the Soviet leader did not hesitate to exploit the situations aggressively, in Laos, Congo, and Cuba.⁵¹ Considering that international affairs are running irrevocably in favor of the communist world, Khrushchev's confidence in the possibility of changing the balance of power was growing. He would continue to exploit those situations where Soviet interests can be advanced without extreme risks. According to the CIA, Berlin was still a crucial problem for Khrushchev, and his overall future

⁴⁹ *Ibidem.*

⁵⁰ „Current Intelligence Weekly Summary: Bloc Statements on Berlin and Germany, 27 April, 1961”, in *CIA Special Collection. The Berlin Wall Collection: A City Torn Apart: Building of the Berlin Wall.*

⁵¹ „Soviet Foreign Policy, 22 May 1961”, in *CIA Special Collection*
<https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP64B00346R000500080001-2.pdf>

course would depend on the outcome of his efforts to resolve this problem in 1961. In addition, if negotiations with the Western powers had not taken place or failed, the Soviet leader would have proceeded with his plan to sign a separate peace treaty and transfer control over Allied military traffic to the East Germans.⁵²

Though the course of the crisis was influenced by the context of the events, the intelligence agency offered, in one of its reports, various actions that the Allies could have taken if the Soviets and East Germans would have hampered the access of Western powers to West Berlin. Thus, one of the first steps the Allies could have taken was to make a substantial effort to open and maintain ground access through limited military action, in which the Allied armed forces were to enter on the autobahn.⁵³ Other measures were imposing economic sanctions and breaking diplomatic relations. These were also the reactions that the Soviets expected most with the change of the right of access. According to the CIA assessment, the communists would have not wanted to completely stop traffic to Berlin to avoid sanctions that would have affected the legitimacy of the communist bloc.⁵⁴

Because Berlin was the place where a conflict between the West and the communist bloc was most likely to break out, the American agency was considering the possibility of a large-scale war. But, in this case, the CIA believed that the Soviets would seek to reopen negotiations to change Berlin's status, because Moscow had no intention of starting a general war. Furthermore, there would have been little public support for a more drastic Allied response as long as

⁵² *Ibidem*, pp. 1-2.

⁵³ „DCI: Briefing: Soviet and other reactions to various courses of actions regarding Berlin”, în Donald P. Steury (ed.), *op.cit.*, p. 555.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 563.

the actions of the Soviets or the East Germans did not show a clear attempt to take control of the entire city.⁵⁵

One month after the CIA report in April, Khrushchev confirmed the estimate that the USSR preferred the renewal of negotiations and a new status for Berlin in 1961. In May, the Soviet leader agreed to have a meeting with Kennedy in Vienna. After the Bay of Pigs disaster, Khrushchev was once again eager to sit at the negotiating table and use the advantage he imagined he had over his weakened opponent.

In a conversation with Llewellyn Thompson, the US Ambassador to Moscow, Khrushchev made it clear that he considered Berlin the main topic of discussion at the next meeting with the US President in Vienna.⁵⁶ Despite Khrushchev's frequent statements on the paramount importance of complete and general disarmament, he told the Ambassador that no other issue was as vital as the German problem, and that disarmament was impossible as long as the Berlin problem remained unresolved.⁵⁷

Rising tensions and arrangements for a possible operation

For those who believed that the large issues of the Cold War could only be resolved through high-level diplomacy, this was a frustrating time.⁵⁸ The different

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 566.

⁵⁶ „Current Intelligence Memorandum: Khrushchev's Conversation with Ambassador Thompson on Berlin," 25 May 1961, in *US National Archives, CIA Records*, p.1 <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/1961-05-25a.pdf>

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 2.

⁵⁸ Lawrence Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars: Berlin, Cuba, Laos, and Vietnam*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 51-56.

temperaments of the two leaders and the distinctive topics of discussion on the political agenda led to the failure of the summit.

Even though no other important meeting between heads of state had attracted as much attention from the international press as that between Kennedy and Khrushchev in Vienna, the aftermath of this meeting did not bring any improvement in the relations between the two superpowers. On the contrary, the Vienna summit soon opened the next and most virulent phase of the Berlin crisis.

The first session of the summit became a dispute in which Kennedy and Khrushchev tried each other's limits. The US president was ready to address the nuclear issue through disarmament and arms control agreements, a subject for which Khrushchev had no real interest, as he stated in the conversation with Thompson. The next day, however, Khrushchev opposed all efforts by the US president to direct talks on banning nuclear experiments. All Khrushchev wanted to discuss was the Berlin question. Claiming that there was no explanation for the non-existence of a peace treaty 16 years after the war, the Soviet leader tried to convince Kennedy that the USSR wanted to normalize the situation not by intrigue or threat, but by solemnly signing a peace treaty.⁵⁹

After an exchange of caustic remarks between the two leaders, in which Khrushchev violated diplomatic etiquette and repeatedly used the word „war“ to signal to Kennedy the price for his stubbornness in resolving the German problem, the Soviet leader issued another ultimatum. The ultimatum was identical to that given to President Eisenhower in 1958: a six month interim for negotiation of a peace treaty with the two German states, which “would also solve the problem of

⁵⁹„Memorandum of Conversation, Vienna, June 4, 1961“, in *FRUS, 1961-1963, Vol. XIV*, p. 90 <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v14/d32>

normalizing the situation in West Berlin”, and a separate USSR-GDR treaty if the Allied Powers refuse to agree.⁶⁰

Back to Washington, President Kennedy and his advisors began planning for the inevitable Soviet attempt to push the Western allies out of West Berlin. Former Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, issued a report at Kennedy's request recommending a much more aggressive policy toward the Soviet Union. In the report, which reached the President on the 28th of June, Acheson said that „until this conflict of wills is resolved, an attempt to solve the Berlin issue by negotiation is worse than a waste of time and energy.”⁶¹ Acheson believed that a Soviet challenge was imminent and that strong and unequivocal resistance was needed. He called for a visible and effective military build-up to increase the credibility of the United States.

In July, US Ambassador to Bonn, Walter Dowling, sent a telegram to the US Department of State warning that the „refugee flow may increase to actual flood unless additional, harsher restrictive measures are taken against travel from Zone into East Berlin and thence across sector border.”⁶² Dowling tried to urge the Western powers to consider what attitude would take if the East German populace might rise against the restrictive measures taken by the communist regime. He believed that Western inaction would have meant “the end of our prestige and influence in West Germany.”⁶³

⁶⁰ „Aide-mémoire from Nikita Khrushchev to John F. Kennedy (Vienna, 4 June 1961)”, in *CVCE.EU* https://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/aide_memoire_from_nikita_khrushchev_to_john_f_kennedy_vienna_4_june_1961-en-930c38eb-5011-494b-ad72-f8ea5cb1fe30.html

⁶¹ „Report by Dean Acheson, Washington, June 28, 1961”, in *FRUS, 1961-1963, Vol. XIV*, p. 139 <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v14/d49>

⁶² „Telegram From the Embassy in Germany to the Department of State, Bonn, July 12, 1961”, in *FRUS, 1961-1963, Vol. XIV*, p.192 <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v14/d65>

⁶³ *Ibidem*.

At the same time, the CIA proposed a solution if communist forces blocked access to Berlin: imposing an embargo on the entire communist bloc or only on East Germany. But it could have only been maintained for a few months because NATO member states would have not been willing to bear the cost for too long.⁶⁴ However, the embargo would have been an element that possibly led the USSR to moderate its policy on Berlin and would have allowed a resumption of negotiations.

The unstable situation and the warnings about the actions that could be taken by the Soviets and East Germans in Berlin, made Kennedy think that it was necessary to convince Khrushchev of his decision to defend West Berlin at all costs. On the 25th of July, in a speech broadcast from the Oval Office, the American President announced a higher defense budget, the call up of reserves, procurement of new weapons, and a step-up of the civil defense program. Saying that West Berlin „has now become, as never before, the great testing place of Western courage and will, a focal point where our solemn commitments stretching back over the years since 1945, and Soviet ambitions now meet in basic confrontation“, Kennedy warned that „an attack upon that city will be regarded as an attack upon“ all NATO allies.⁶⁵

Kennedy's speech, however, changed Khrushchev's perceptions. It was clear that additional demands and threats would have escalated the crisis that could have led to a nuclear conflict. What the Soviet leader had to do was to end

⁶⁴ „Special National Intelligence Estimate: Probable Soviet reaction to a western embargo, 18 July 1961“ in *CIA Special Collection. The Berlin Wall Collection: A City Torn Apart: Building of the Berlin Wall*

⁶⁵ „Radio and television report to the American people on the Berlin Crisis, July 25, 1961“, in *Papers of John F. Kennedy...*

<https://www.jfklibrary.org/archives/other-resources/john-f-kennedy-speeches/berlin-crisis-19610725>

the Berlin crisis more prudently, without too much cost. The solution found was to prevent access to West Berlin from East Germany. The closure of Berlin's sectoral border was a quick fix that would have prevented East Germany from collapsing. In July 1961, thirty thousand East Germans moved across to the refugee camps in West Berlin, the largest monthly number since 1953.⁶⁶

Moreover, even if Walter Ulbricht could not act against Moscow's wishes, he could still influence events and attitudes. Ulbricht's rhetoric tended to undermine Soviet claims that the West Berliners would barely notice a change under the „free city“ proposal and encouraged East Berliners to leave. Holding a press conference in East Berlin, on the 15th of June, and answering questions from journalists, Ulbricht made an unexpected remark that gave a clue as to what was to come. Asked by a West German correspondent that creating a free Berlin would involve building a state border at the Brandenburg Gate, the East German leader replied that „nobody has any intention of building a wall“.⁶⁷ His words seemed to anticipate the future action, even though he denied it.

In early August, Khrushchev and Ulbricht discussed the details of the border closure between East and West Berlin. During their conversation, Khrushchev had said that Soviet and East German forces must surround Berlin „with an iron ring“, with Soviet troops creating the ring and East German forces controlling it.⁶⁸ The Soviet leader believed that „this must happen before a peace treaty is concluded. It would be a means of pressure, it will show that we take the

⁶⁶ Lawrence Freedman, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

⁶⁷ „Nobody has any intention of building a wall“, June 15, 1961, in *The Berlin Wall – A multimedia history* <https://www.the-berlin-wall.com/videos/walter-ulbricht-building-a-wall-530/>

⁶⁸ „Notes on the Conversation of comrade N.S. Khrushchev with comrade W. Ulbricht on 1 August 1961“, in *Digital Archive International History Declassified, Berlin Wall Collection, Woodrow Wilson Center* <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/110206>

issue seriously and it will reduce, at the same time, the exodus of refugees.”⁶⁹ The East German leader was, however, already prepared, declaring to Khrushchev that „we have a specific plan. In houses with exits into West Berlin, they will be walled up. In other places, barbed wire barriers will be erected. The barbed wire has already been delivered. It can all happen very quickly.”⁷⁰

On the 10th of August, a CIA report that analyzes the composition of refugee flow, their motivation to flee from the East, and the effect on GDR, told that East German propaganda on the 10th of August suggested that a decree promulgating new and more vigorous control measures would be forthcoming from the meeting of the East German People Chamber on the 11th of August.⁷¹

Simultaneously with the meeting of the communist bloc states in Moscow, between 4th and 9th of August, Foreign Ministers of the US, France, Great Britain, and FRG met at Paris to discuss the Western initiative toward negotiations and its timing, the development of NATO forces and the countermeasures that Western powers should take if their rights in Berlin are threatened.⁷² Nevertheless, the West seemed to ignore the fact that the actions were taken by Moscow and the East German regime quickly accelerated.

Sealing off the sector border

⁶⁹ *Ibidem.*

⁷⁰ *Ibidem.*

⁷¹ „Central Intelligence Agency, Office of Current Intelligence: East German Refugee, 10 august 1961”, in *The National Security Archive* , p.6 <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB354/8-10-61%20refugees.pdf>

⁷² „Paper Prepared by the Four-Power Working Group on Germany and Berlin, Paris, August 8, 1961”, in *FRUS, 1961-1963, Vol. XIV*, pp.317-318 <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v14/d101>

At 4 p.m. on the 12th of August, Walter Ulbricht signed the orders to close the border, and at midnight the alert was given and the border closure operation began. Free movement on foot, by car, train, or boat from East to West Berlin was stopped. The U-Bahn, S-Bahn, tram, and buses were all stopped from crossing the border, and their old crossing points were blocked.⁷³ Along the border, trucks unloaded concrete pillars and barbed wire, blocking all 193 streets leading from East Berlin to its western sector.

The group around Erich Honecker, who planned the „Operation Rose“, did not consist of more than eight people because everything had to look like a routine police operation. So that Western intelligence agencies had no clue what was going to happen, no telephone and no radio transmission was allowed, the information documents being sent by courier, for security reasons. Thus, on the ground in Berlin, the American diplomatic and intelligence officials responsible for assessing the situation had no real idea what was about to happen.⁷⁴

Immediately after the barbed wire fence was installed along the entire border of the sector, East Germany issued a new decree that restricted travel between East Berlin and West Berlin. According to GDR, reliable safeguards and effective control must be ensured on the West Berlin borders to put an end to the hostile activities and the revanchist and militarist forces of West Germany and West Berlin.⁷⁵ Thereby, insisting on transforming the status of Berlin, the GDR's decree states that „until West Berlin is turned into a demilitarized neutral free city,

⁷³ Hope Harrison, *The German Democratic Republic, the Soviet Union and the Berlin Wall Crisis*, in vol. John Gearson; Kori Schake (ed.), *The Berlin Wall Crisis: Perspectives on Cold War Alliances*, p. 113.

⁷⁴ Frederick Taylor, *op. cit.*, p.160

⁷⁵ „Decree of the German Democratic Republic Imposing Restrictions on Travel Between East and West Berlin, August 13, 1961“, in *Documents on Germany 1944-1985...*, p. 775 <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015011724781&view=1up&seq=837&skin=2021>

the citizens of the GDR will have to have a special permit for crossing the border to West Berlin".⁷⁶

Looking back on the events of the last few months, the CIA was trying to figure out if any signs possibly announced the closure of the border. According to a CIA report from the 17th of August 1961, the appointment of Marshal Ivan Konev as commander of the Soviet forces in Berlin, during a period of greatly increased tensions, should have aroused suspicion. Thus, his appointment was part of the Soviet strategy to impress the East German populace with the extent of Soviet support for the regime and Soviet willingness to use its forces to suppress any popular opposition. Also, the CIA thought that Khrushchev probably felt that the appointment of a man with Konev's prestige and experience would strengthen his efforts to impress the West with his determination to conclude a separate treaty in the absence of a negotiated settlement.⁷⁷

Although Westerners were aware that additional harsh measures would be introduced soon by the communist regime to end the mass flight of East Germans, the actual event took everyone by surprise. The President, who was at Hyannis Port, on Cape Cod, was notified about the events that took place in Berlin six hours after the border was closed.⁷⁸

The first official reaction of the US administration about the border closure operation came from Dean Rusk. In his statement, Rusk said that the limitation on travel within Berlin was a violation of the four-power status of Berlin and a flagrant

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁷ „Current Intelligence Weekly Summary: Weekly Review, 17 August 1961”, in *The National Security Archive* <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB354/8-17-61%20current%20intell.pdf>

⁷⁸ Michael Beschloss, *op. cit.*, p. 310.

violation of the right of free circulation throughout the city.⁷⁹ Moreover, to justify the lack of immediate reaction from the US, the secretary of state pointed out that measures taken thus far were aimed at residents of East Berlin and East Germany and not at the Allied position in West Berlin or access thereto.⁸⁰

In East Berlin, the communists were in control and nobody was suggesting a direct challenge. The options for helping people on the eastern side of the Iron Curtain were few, and most seemed to involve a heightened risk of great-power war.⁸¹ Thus, Western powers never considered East Berlin a problem for which they were willing to risk a war. Dean Rusk saw border closure as a defensive move by the East German and Soviet forces and George Kennan believed that Khrushchev closed the border to end a confrontation, not to provoke one.⁸²

Analyzing the impact that the closure of the border had on the East German population, the CIA believed that a general uprising against the communist regime was unlikely to take place in GDR. The Agency considered that the East Germans would not engage in large-scale hasty actions because they were still waiting for help from the Western powers.⁸³ But, the help from the Westerners was not going to appear.

Berliners and West Germans reacted to this seeming inaction from the Western powers with fury. Hundreds of thousands of West Berliners demonstrated at the Brandenburg Gate and the Governing Mayor of West Berlin,

⁷⁹ „Statement by Secretary of State Rusk Concerning Travel Restrictions in Berlin, August 13, 1961”, in *Documents on Germany 1944-1985*, p. 776
<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015011724781&view=1up&seq=838&skin=2021>

⁸⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁸¹ Lawrence Freedman, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

⁸² Michael Beschloss, *op. cit.*, p. 314.

⁸³ „National Intelligence Estimate: The outlook in East Germany”, in *CIA Special Collection. The Berlin Wall Collection...*, pp. 4-5.

Willy Brandt, angrily demanded some action from Kennedy by which the illegal measures imposed by the East German regime to be canceled and free movement in Berlin restored.⁸⁴

Wanting to show that the US was still a reliable ally and to reaffirm American commitments, Kennedy took decisive steps to protect the freedom and independence of West Berlin. So, the American administration decided to strengthen the garrison in the western part of the city by increasing the number of soldiers and sending in Berlin Vice-President Lyndon B. Johnson and former Military Governor General Lucius D. Clay, the architect of the successful Berlin airlift and a hero of the Germans.⁸⁵

The day before Kennedy's two representatives arrived in Berlin, East German authorities were replacing the barbed wire fence with a concrete wall. Closing the border no longer seemed a temporary measure.

The signing of a peace treaty between the USSR and the GDR and transforming Berlin into a „free city“ was still a threat, even though the number of refugees had fallen sharply since the 13th of August. On the 23rd of August, the Soviets sent a note to the governments of the three Allied powers demanding that immediate actions had to be taken by the Westerns to end West Germany's subversive activities. The Soviet Union blamed the Allied powers for „using air corridors to send from FRG to West Berlin all kinds of revanchists, extremists, saboteurs, and spies.“⁸⁶ Thus, the Soviet government declared that the USA, Great

⁸⁴ Arthur G. Kogan, *U.S. Department of State Research Project: Crisis over Berlin: Part. V: Developments in the early phase of Kennedy Administration*, Historical Office, Bureau of Public Affairs, 1970, p. 89.

⁸⁵ „Letter From President Kennedy to Governing Mayor Brandt, Washington, August 18, 1961“ in *FRUS, 1961-1963, Vol. XIV*, p. 353 <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v14/d120>

⁸⁶ „Note from the Soviet Union to the United States Protesting the Transport of West German Officials to West Berlin Through the Allied Air Corridors, August 23, 1961“, in *Documents on Germany, 1944-*

Britain, and France were abusing their position in West Berlin, taking advantage of the lack of control over the airlines.

Noting that the border closure operation did not stop pressure from the Soviets and East Germans to change the status of West Berlin, the CIA tried to estimate what tactics the Soviets might adopt in the next period. According to a report from the 24th of August, stopping the flow of refugees would not have changed the Soviet Union's vision to support East Germany's claims to sovereignty. The signing of a peace treaty and, possibly, the expulsion of Western influence from Berlin, was still an important aim on the Soviet foreign agenda. Thereby, the CIA thought that the communist regime could deny all the rights of the Allied powers to enter East Berlin, destroying the four-power status of that part of the city, and the East German authorities might disrupt or harass civilian traffic between West Berlin and the FRG.⁸⁷ But these measures were going to be taken gradually. The CIA believed that their preference was to let the effects of the border closure sink in and see whether the Western powers become more inclined to accept Soviet terms of negotiations.⁸⁸ Moreover, if negotiations were in train toward the end of the year, Khrushchev would have probably postponed his deadline for a treaty. The American agency considered that a treaty would not be signed before the Party Congress, convened on the 17th of October.

In September, Oleg Penkovsky, a CIA agent who had infiltrated the Soviet Military Intelligence Service, sent a report which contained alarming information

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<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015011724781&view=1up&seq=846&skin=2021>

⁸⁷ „Special National Intelligence Estimate: Soviet Tactics in the Berlin Crisis“, in Donald P. Steury (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 585.

⁸⁸ *Ibidem*, p.586.

that gave Washington reasons to increase the conventional forces. Penkovsky's report provided information about Khrushchev's military training plans, on a large scale, for the autumn of 1961. According to Penkovsky, building the wall was regarded by the Soviets as the „first pill” which managed to be „swallowed” by the Allies. „The second pill” was the peace treaty or, if necessary, military action to remove Western powers from Berlin.⁸⁹ The CIA agent's report also provided details on when the Soviets would decide to sign the peace treaty with the GDR. Thus, the announcement of the signing would have been made at the opening of the Congress of the Communist Party in October, and immediately after the Congress, Khrushchev would have wanted to sign the treaty.⁹⁰ Besides that, Penkovsky revealed that he had found out, by accident, details of the plan to close the border four days before the operation, but he had no secure means of transmitting the information to his Western contacts.

Penkovsky's conclusions, however, were viewed with relative skepticism by the CIA. In its October 1961 report, the intelligence agency considered that the Soviet's military preparations were not intended to sustain a general war soon. These were rather undertaken to convince the West of the military power of the communist states and of persuading the Allies to accept concessions on Berlin. The CIA believed the Soviets needed contingency plans for the next phase of the Berlin crisis but it was probable that the USSR would still choose the least risky methods to achieve its goal. It was unlikely that the Soviets would launch a major military

⁸⁹ „Penkovsky, Meeting No. 31, 22nd September 1961”, in Donald P. Steury (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 613.

⁹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 615.

offensive. They would do this only if they are sure that a Western attack is inevitable and imminent.⁹¹

The „second pill“ predicted by Penkovsky would not appear too soon, even though the events of the following months maintained the climate of uncertainty. Both conciliation and confrontation, two features of the Berlin crisis, reappeared in Soviet-American relations. This accentuated the paradox of the policies, which made it difficult for the CIA to anticipate the future tactics of the Soviets.

On the 25th of September 1961, John F. Kennedy gave a speech to the United Nations General Assembly recalling the German and Berlin issues and stating that „solemn agreements are being treated with indifference“, and „peaceful circulation has been interrupted by barbed wire and concrete blocks.“ A so-called peace treaty, according to the American president, would destroy peace even more, and a „free city“, which is not genuinely free, would be an „infamy“⁹². Saying that „the possibilities of negotiation are now being explored“, Kennedy was sending, at the same time, a conciliatory message to the USSR.

Just one week after Kennedy's speech, Khrushchev decided to seize advantage of the peaceful direction the American president seemed to be heading. On the 29th of September, he sent to Kennedy a letter that led to the so-called „Pen-Pal correspondence“ between the two leaders. In his letter, Khrushchev reiterated the need to conclude a German peace treaty and suggested negotiations, but without giving a new ultimatum.⁹³ Khrushchev saw no reason why negotiation in

⁹¹ „Special National Intelligence Estimate: Soviet Tactics in the Berlin Crisis, 5th October 1961“, in Donald P. Steury (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 621-625.

⁹² „Address by President John F. Kennedy to the UN General Assembly“, September 25, 1961, in *U.S. Department of State: Diplomacy in Action* <https://2009-2017.state.gov/p/io/potusunga/207241.htm>

⁹³ „Letter From Chairman Khrushchev to President Kennedy, Moscow, September 29, 1961“, in *FRUS, 1961-1963, Vol. XIV*, p. 448 <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v14/d162>

good faith could not produce settlements in both places. He was willing, if the US President was, to take another look at positions frozen hard through fifteen years of Cold War.⁹⁴

In his reply, two weeks later, Kennedy stated that the area has been peaceful and „it might be rendered less peaceful if such a treaty should convince the German people that their long-cherished hopes for unification were frustrated”⁹⁵. Furthermore, he proposed to the Soviet leader to „talk about the peace which flows from actual conditions of peace, not merely treaties that bear that label”.⁹⁶

When the American president sent the letter to Khrushchev, the Congress of the Communist Party was in full swing in Moscow. Contrary to CIA agent Oleg Penkovsky’s estimates, the Soviet leader did not use Congress to officially announce the signing of a peace treaty with East Germany. For Khrushchev, building the wall was a perfect solution for solving the problems that GDR faced. The international recognition of the East German state was a matter that could wait.

Dissatisfied by the Soviet leader’s decision to abandon the idea of a peace treaty with East Germany, Walter Ulbricht again decided to take control in East Berlin. At the end of October, the GDR leader unilaterally intensified border inspections, East German police, *Volkspolizei* or *Vopos*, starting checks on Allied

⁹⁴ Michael Beschloss, *op. cit.*, p. 361.

⁹⁵ „Letter From President Kennedy to Chairman Khrushchev, Hyannis Port, October 16, 1961”, in *FRUS, 1961-1963, Vol. VI, Kennedy-Khrushchev Exchanges*, p. 40
<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v06/d22>

⁹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 41.

civilians.⁹⁷ But, now, General Lucius Clay was in Berlin and he was prepared to defend the Western sector by any means. Clay felt that the issue of the Checkpoint Charlie, open to foreigners and diplomats, needed to be re-examined.⁹⁸ At the initiative of the General, President Kennedy approved that if the Friedrichstrasse closing point is closed either by unacceptable demands for documentation by the GDR or by the erection of a barrier, the US would run two or three tanks up to the checkpoint to demolish whatever was barring the entry.⁹⁹ The actions of the East German regime to violate the procedures established by the four powers led the Americans to implement the decision much faster than they expected.

On the 22nd of October, East German border guards attempted to interfere with State Department Representative Allen Lightner's access rights to East Berlin at Checkpoint Charlie.¹⁰⁰ Immediately after this incident, on the 26th of October, tanks were brought to the Friedrichstrasse area. The next day Soviet tanks moved into opposing positions. Soviet and American tank commanders stared at each other over open gun sights. The military confrontation that everyone had feared seemed to be at hand.

Nevertheless, the fast settlement of the confrontation at the Checkpoint Charlie reflected the striking reality of the power relations between the USA and

⁹⁷ Frederick Kempe, *Berlin 1961. Kennedy, Hruščiov și cel mai periculos loc din lume*, București, Editura Litera, 2013, p. 553.

⁹⁸ „Memorandum From Acting Secretary of State Ball to President Kennedy, Washington, October 14, 1961”, in *FRUS, 1961-1963, Vol. XIV*, p. 499 <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v14/d178>

⁹⁹ „National Security Action Memoranda [NSAM]: NSAM 107, Friedrichstrasse Crossing Point, 18 October 1961”, in *Papers of John F. Kennedy. Presidential Papers. National Security Files*. <https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/JFKNSF/332/JFKNSF-332-009>

¹⁰⁰ „Telegram From the Mission at Berlin to the Department of State, Berlin, October 23, 1961”, in *FRUS, 1961-1963, Vol. XIV*, p. 525. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v14/d186>

the USSR. Kennedy did not want to start a war because US officials did not agree to present documents to East Germans and Khrushchev did not want to let the East German satellite lead him to a new war.¹⁰¹ What the standoff did was to show leaders the convenience of implementing backdoor diplomacy and the symbolic recognition of the *status-quo* set on the 13th of August. Therefore, the possibility of an escalating military conflict over the Berlin Crisis seemed to have ended with the withdrawal of tanks on the morning of the 28th of October.

Conclusions

A concern since the end of the Second World War, Berlin has been at the center of the dispute between East and West. But the closure of the border in the summer of 1961 put an end to the danger in Berlin. The symbol of the separation between the two competing systems, the Wall seemed not so much a problem as a solution for the political leaders. The war had been averted and the independence and freedom of West Berlin preserved, albeit at a price.

The threat of the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev to transfer control of the rights of access in Berlin to the East German authorities, led the Central Intelligence Agency to carefully consider any possible attempt by the Soviets to undermine the Allied rights in the city. But the inconsistency of Khrushchev's statements, his ultimatums alternating with periods of stability, made it difficult for the US Intelligence Agency to always provide estimates that would correspond, to a certain extent, to the movements that the Soviet Union was to undertake. Therefore, although many of the agency's expectations were in line with the actions taken by the communist regime, the construction of the Wall was not

¹⁰¹ Frederick Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 286.

among them. The complexity of the city of Berlin and its border made such a measure as the building a Wall, the complete sealing off access to the western sectors, be perceived as impossible.

However, even though the CIA couldn't predict how the Berlin crisis would end, the agency provided essential information about Khrushchev's political behavior. Thereby, the CIA described the Soviet approach during the crisis as a limited risk policy, in which the military threat was used to secure political objectives. As it happened, the Soviet leader did not want to go to war for Berlin. Sacrificing a lot for a city that the USSR was trying to destroy only sixteen years earlier was not the best solution.

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