

## CHAPTER FIVE

# BERLIN 1961—THE MOST DANGEROUS PLACE ON EARTH

In Chapter Four I discussed the seismic after effects from the Bay of Pigs disaster and how they shook the U.S. national security apparatus to its foundations. I described how the president wrestled with the men who had deceived him. Yet something sinister beyond his control had been unleashed: The April 1961 Cuban cataclysm sowed the seeds of deep animosity toward President Kennedy among disparate American circles and it festered for the rest of the year. That hostility would only deepen further in 1962, and I believe it played a role in the tragedy that took place in Dallas on 22 November 1963. My intent in this chapter is to open the door to another unnoticed but important accelerant of the incipient sentiment that President Kennedy had to be brought down. That role was inadvertently played by Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev.

Let me be clear about my views on this point: Khrushchev was *not* a part of the plot to assassinate President Kennedy—as was alleged by those who originally designed the cover-up of the conspiracy; *and* by those authors today who, one would hope, inadvertently, keep spinning that old canard, oblivious to the cover they are providing to the real perpetrators of the assassination. Premier Khrushchev did *not* want JFK killed—far from it. Khrushchev knew he would do much worse with a Lyndon Johnson or a Barry Goldwater in the White House.

Khrushchev did, albeit indirectly, contribute to the tragedy in Dallas by shaping the key events that helped bring it about. Ironically, it was those same events and the death of JFK that led to Khrushchev's overthrow on 14 October 1964. In 1960, Khrushchev had moved quickly to arm Castro's regime to the teeth, ensuring that the only way it could be overthrown was by a full-scale U.S. military intervention. Kennedy understood that short of a resort to nuclear war with the Soviet Union, *the price for the invasion of Cuba was West Berlin*. Khrushchev's ultimate goal was to eliminate the "thorn," the "ulcer," of West Berlin.

Kennedy's decision *not to invade Cuba*, while unpopular in America at the time, *left U.S. military forces available* to the president—forces that would have to be quickly and significantly increased—to *call Khrushchev's Berlin bluff* just four months hence. That is, in fact, what happened. Following the creation of the Berlin Wall (August-September 1961), a dangerous standoff between U.S. and Soviet tanks took place in Berlin at Check Point Charlie. Through a private channel, Kennedy signaled Khrushchev that he would go easy on Berlin in the future if the Soviet tanks withdrew first. The premier agreed. Privately, Kennedy told his aides, "It's not a very nice solution, but a wall is better than a war."<sup>1</sup>

But that was only the *first* episode in Khrushchev's strategy to push the West out of Berlin. The game was far from over. The Soviet premier was also attempting to draw the Americans into a "containing" position in Southeast Asia. The idea was to tie up U.S. military power there and also to put pressure on the Chinese Communist leadership to purge Mao Zedong and end the Sino-Soviet dispute. Not until the Berlin Crisis *appeared* to be in remission at the end of 1961 did Kennedy accept the bait in Vietnam—exactly in the manner Khrushchev wanted him to. The Soviet leader did not seek an immediate overwhelming use of American forces in Vietnam; rather, Moscow's long-term strategy was a slowly deepening vortex in Southeast Asia that would eventually bring about a Sino-American conflict there and resurrect the Sino-Soviet alliance.

In that context—and providing that a nuclear holocaust had not erupted—West Berlin would easily fall into communist hands. On 29 July 1961, KGB Chief Aleksandr Shelepin delivered an "array of proposals" to Khrushchev to help the premier achieve his objective in Berlin:

To create a situation in various areas of the world that would favor dispersion of attention and forces by the United States and their satellites and would *tie them down during the settlement of the question of a German peace treaty and West Berlin.*<sup>2</sup> [Emphasis added]

As we will see, Khrushchev took this suggestion to heart. He would be willing to negotiate over Laos, Cuba, or the Congo, so long as he came away with Berlin.

The second episode of Khrushchev's crisis strategy occurred in 1962, with a dangerous stunt that precipitated the Cuban Missile Crisis. Kennedy humiliated the Soviet premier by forcing him to remove his missiles from Cuba. The

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Beschloss, *The Crisis Years—Kennedy and Khrushchev, 1960-1963* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), p. 278.

<sup>2</sup> Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War—From Stalin to Khrushchev* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 253.

president's astute handling of the crisis, however popular it was with Americans and Europeans, enraged the same circles in the U.S. that were furious with the president for his handling of the Bay of Pigs crisis in 1961.

In the months following the Missile Crisis, Kennedy and Defense Secretary McNamara began secretly planning to withdraw the American advisors from Vietnam. I believe that during this period—in mid to late 1962—a plot to assassinate President Kennedy was hatched. And that was something Khrushchev had not foreseen. His grand scheme went up in smoke as the result of the Kennedy assassination in November 1963. JFK's death quickly led to a U.S. congressional blank check for massive direct American military intervention in Vietnam. Khrushchev's fall from power in Moscow took place exactly sixty-eight days after the passage of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in Washington on 7 August 1964.<sup>3</sup> That meant that Moscow would need land access through China to Vietnam to sustain North Vietnam, and that the price of Chinese cooperation was Khrushchev's removal.

In this manner, Khrushchev's manufacturing of crises to push the West out of Berlin succeeded only in his own overthrow in the aftermath of the assassination of President Kennedy. The removing of the "ulcer" of West Berlin had been a principal Soviet objective since the end of World War II in 1945. That goal came to its inevitable and ignominious end with the demolition of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989, and to the revolutions during that year in which all of the socialist regimes in Eastern Europe—except Romania—were peacefully toppled. The dissolution of the USSR took place on Christmas Day, 1991.

## **The European Chessboard—1945-1960**

At the end of World War II, Germany was partitioned into Soviet, American, British and French zones of occupation. Although the city of Berlin remained deep inside the Soviet zone, it was also split, with the Soviets taking the eastern part of the city. Western Berlin was split into three parts occupied by the allies. Stalin's attempt to blockade West Berlin in 1948 had been thwarted by a massive Allied airlift. In 1949, the three Western zones became the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) and the Soviet zone in the east became the German Democratic Republic (East Germany). During the next decade, over three million East Germans fled to West Germany through West Berlin, and by 1961 more than 1,000

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<sup>3</sup> Richard C. Thornton, "Soviet Strategy and the Vietnam War," *Asian Affairs*, No. 4, March-April 1974, pp. 205-228.

skilled laborers, professionals and intellectuals were fleeing East Germany every day. This exodus exposed the Soviet Bloc for what it was: A dictatorship—not of the proletariat—but of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

During the Cold War, Europe had become the chessboard upon which the geostrategic competition between Moscow and Washington played itself out. With the only substantial land army on the continent, France occupied the Western sub-center squares on the chessboard. France was the key to America's NATO strategy to contain Soviet influence. As a result, Washington repeatedly turned its back on African and Asian nations in deference to Paris' foolish attempt to maintain control of its colonial empire in North Africa and Indochina. This occurred at a time when independence from colonial rule had become the dominant trend in the world. Eisenhower did this to newly independent Congo in 1960, turning a blind eye to Belgium's naked attempt to break up the territorial integrity of that mineral rich African nation.

The center squares on the Cold War European chessboard were occupied by East and West Germany. As the game unfolded, the city of Berlin became much more than an "ulcer." It became a perpetual point of infernal danger. Berlin, a lonely pawn at the center of the board, anchored the Cold War in the dangerous reciprocal hostility that would grip the world for three decades. In 1958, Khrushchev had demanded a German peace treaty to permanently legitimize the division of Germany. That demand remained when the Paris Summit Conference exploded in May 1960. And it would become the focal point in Khrushchev's secret scheme for testing the newly elected forty-four-year-old American president.<sup>4</sup>

## **The March 1961 CIA Survey of Berlin-Related Clandestine Operations**

In March 1961, about one month after Kennedy's inauguration, the CIA Berlin Operations Base (BOB) Deputy Chief—and also chief of Soviet operations—David E. Murphy, visited CIA HQS in Washington. He took part in a survey being prepared in the Agency's Eastern European (EE) Division on possible clandestine activities to support the U.S. mission in Berlin. After he arrived at the base in the summer of 1954, Murphy was briefed by BOB Chief Bill Harvey on the highly sensitive intelligence operation to tap into Soviet underground

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<sup>4</sup> David E. Murphy, Sergei Kondrashev and George Bailey, *Battleground Berlin—CIA vs KGB in the Cold War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 361-362.

communications by building a quarter-mile tunnel into the Soviet sector of Berlin.<sup>5</sup> The ubiquitous Henry Hecksher<sup>6</sup> had, as BOB's chief of operations, supervised the effort to recruit German post office officials who knew the telecommunications wiring for all of Berlin.<sup>7</sup>

Murphy enlisted in the Army during WWII and was sent to California to learn French but due to a clerical error ended up learning Russian instead. While working for the Army in post-war South Korea, he was recruited by the newly created CIA. His Russian language skills were valuable to BOB. Murphy took over the base after Harvey's return to HQS in 1959.

When Murphy arrived at CIA HQS in 1961 to help with the East European Division (EED) Berlin survey, the Bay of Pigs landing was just a month away. In Washington almost no one was aware, except for DDP Bissell, that his two top operations men for the invasion, Jake Esterline (chief of the Cuban branch) and Jack Hawkins (chief of the paramilitary desk) wanted to resign because they were certain the plan was doomed. Ironically, neither Esterline nor Hawkins understood that DCI Allen Dulles and several of the Pentagon chiefs intended that the invasion would fail. The president had declared that under no circumstances would he authorize the use of U.S. military forces in Cuba. However, Dulles and several of the chiefs were certain that once the Cuban exiles were being cut down on the beachhead Kennedy would have no choice but to send in the Air Force and Marines.

In March, however, the unabated exodus of refugees fleeing to the West through Berlin seemed more likely than Cuba to develop into a crisis. The EE survey of potential clandestine operations in Berlin had been requested by Henry Kissinger, who was in Washington from Harvard to advise the administration on the Berlin problem. The survey's underlying assumption was that Moscow intended to integrate East Berlin into East Germany and "make the Western position in West Berlin so tenuous that the West will eventually see no alternative but to withdraw from Berlin and recognize East Germany as a sovereign state."<sup>8</sup>

The March 1961 Berlin survey offered suggestions similar to those contained in the September 1960 EE "Long Range Plan for Berlin." Those

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<sup>5</sup> Murphy, Kondrashev and Bailey, *Battleground Berlin*, p. 209.

<sup>6</sup> Hecksher's activities are covered in detail in Volumes I and II of the present series. See especially John Newman, *Countdown to Darkness—The Assassination of President Kennedy, Volume II* (Amazon: Create Space, 2017), see Chapters Nine and Twenty-One.

<sup>7</sup> Bayard Stockton, *Flawed Patriot—The Rise and Fall of CIA Legend Bill Harvey* (Washington D.C.: Potomac Books, 2006), p. 76.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p. 355.

suggestions had been based on BOB's recommendations. The recommendations included a larger presence in Berlin—culturally and militarily—that would increase international interest in the city's continuing freedom and would also counter communist propaganda. Those goals were realistic. But the March 1961 survey contained something that was extremely *unrealistic*: The final section concerned fomenting an “insurrection” in East Germany. Murphy and his colleagues in EE knew this was not feasible. Apparently, one or more senior policy makers—probably at the State Department—wanted suggestions aimed at increasing East Germany's “instability.”

The CIA had no illusions that it was possible to cause a popular uprising against a Soviet-supported communist regime in Central Europe through the use of externally mounted clandestine operations. In Chapter Twenty of *Countdown to Darkness*, I laid out the evidence that shows senior CIA officers and those close to invasion planning knew full well that a Cuban uprising in 1961 was a myth. Yet, even so, DDP Bissell and DCI Dulles lied to Kennedy by telling him a Cuban uprising would succeed.<sup>9</sup> The point here is that the efficiency of the East German police state was *far better* than Cuba's secret police and perhaps even better than the KGB.<sup>10</sup> The Berlin survey team's reaction to the idea of fomenting an insurrection in East Germany was decidedly negative:

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<sup>9</sup> Newman, *Countdown to Darkness*, see pp. 348-353. In his research for Volume III of the *CIA Official History of the Bay of Pigs Operations*, Jack Pfeiffer discovered that a “strange” note had “appeared” at the 15 November 1960 WH/4 staff meeting with this important news:

Our [CIA's] original concept is now seen to be unachievable in the face of the controls Castro has instituted. *There will not be the internal unrest earlier believed possible*, nor will the defenses permit the type [of] strike first planned.

See Pfeiffer Volume III, p. 149. Although Pfeiffer discussed this document, it has not been released. I filed a FOIA request for it in United States District Court for the District of Columbia on 12 October 2016. The CIA indicated that they would take action by 24 May 2017, but they missed that deadline and revised the completed date to 19 December 2017. On 28 May 2018, the CIA indicated that they did not locate “any records responsive to your request” regarding the strange note. The Agency stated that I had “the legal right to appeal the finding of no records responsive to your request.” On 11 August 2018, I filed such an appeal. On 17 August 2018, the Agency acknowledged that they had received my appeal. As of this writing, that is where matters stand.

<sup>10</sup> John O Koehler. *Stasi: The Untold Story of The East German Secret Police* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999), pp. 8-9:

“The Gestapo had 40,000 officials watching a country of 80 million, while the [East German] Stasi employed 102,000 to control only 17 million.” To ensure that the people would become and remain submissive, East German communist leaders saturated their realm with more spies than had any other totalitarian government in recent history. The Soviet Union's KGB employed about 480,000 full-time agents to oversee a nation of 280 million, which means there was one agent per 5,830 citizens. Using Wiesenthal's figures for the Nazi Gestapo, there was one officer for 2,000 people. The ratio for the Stasi was one secret policeman per 166 East Germans. When the regular informers are added, these ratios become much higher: In the Stasi's case, there would have been at least one spy watching every 66 citizens! When one adds in the estimated numbers of part-time snoops, the result is nothing short of

As for possible insurrection, the reaction was firm and to the point. Having raised the issue as a question, the Eastern European Division drafters stated flatly that “insurrection is not a feasible clandestine operation except in a situation in which open military action between the Soviet Union and the West is actually imminent.”<sup>11</sup>

As I will note in a section below, former Secretary of State Dean Acheson would propose this *same* idea (insurrection in East Germany) to President Kennedy in June 1961, just one week after William Harvey and EE dismissed it out of hand.

## The Path to the Vienna Summit

After the failure of the May 1960 Paris Summit, Khrushchev began to support the Democratic Party in the fall 1960 U.S. presidential election. Never before had a Soviet Premier taken such an intense interest in a U.S. presidential campaign. In late November, the President-Elect sent campaign advisers Walt Rostow and Jerome Wiesner to Moscow to meet with Soviet disarmament experts. Deputy Foreign Minister Vasili Kuznetsov asked the Americans, “What can we do to help the new administration?” Rostow and Wiesner presented Kuznetsov a list of items drafted with the input of U.S. Ambassador Llewellyn Thompson:

The RB-47 pilots<sup>12</sup> should be freed “without Kennedy’s having to ask for them or bargain for them.” *Pressure on Berlin should be relaxed.* During test ban talks, the Soviets must be “very generous” about on-site inspections.

Rostow told Kuznetsov there could be no summit with Kennedy unless it was “well prepared and concerned with very concrete business.”<sup>13</sup> On 15 December, Soviet Ambassador to the U.S. Mikhail Menshikov spoke off the record to Harrison Salisbury of the *New York Times* to deliver this anxious message:

“Time is of the essence.” The two leaders must meet “before those who would not like to see agreement have had a chance to act and prevent it. . . . There is more to be gained by one solid day spent in private and informal talk between Khrushchev and Kennedy than all the meetings of underlings taken together.”

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monstrous: one informer per 6.5 citizens. It would not have been unreasonable to assume that at least one Stasi informer was present in any party of ten or twelve dinner guests.

<sup>11</sup> Murphy, Kondrashev and Bailey, *Battleground Berlin*, p. 357.

<sup>12</sup> On 1 July, the Soviet Union shot down a U.S. Air Force RB - 47 airplane, which was on a proposed mission from the United Kingdom near the northern borders of Norway and the Soviet Union and over the Barents Sea, and rescued two of the six crew members. The two survivors were Captain John B. McKone and Captain Freeman Bruce Olmstead. The U.S. disputed the Soviet claim that the American airplane had entered Soviet airspace.

<sup>13</sup> Beschloss, *The Crisis Years*, p. 41.

As presidential historian Michael Beschloss observed, this was the first time a Soviet leader “badgered” a U.S. president for a summit meeting before his inauguration.<sup>14</sup>

As the Kennedy inauguration approached, Khrushchev pivoted his policy abruptly toward détente by releasing the American RB-47 pilots and approving other measures to improve Soviet-American diplomacy. At his first press conference on 25 January 1961, President Kennedy said the U.S. government was “gratified” by this decision and “considers that this action of the Soviet government removes a serious obstacle to improvement of Soviet–American relations.”<sup>15</sup> Kennedy and Khrushchev began using back-channel communications through Robert Kennedy on the U.S. side and, on the Soviet side, through GRU Colonel Georgi Bolshakov, who was working undercover in Washington as a press secretary at the Soviet Embassy.<sup>16</sup>

There was much more to Khrushchev’s courting of Kennedy than unassuming congeniality. The Premier was facing pushback from hardline Soviet leaders over his proposal to reduce the Soviet armed forces by 1.2 million men and his heated dispute with Beijing. Khrushchev needed a quick rapprochement with the U.S. to continue this course, and he had calculated Kennedy would be easier to manipulate than Mao Zedong. Khrushchev wanted a summit as soon as possible, before Kennedy’s policies on Berlin, a test ban, and the arms race were cast in concrete.<sup>17</sup>

The U.S. Ambassador to the USSR, Llewellyn Thompson, lobbied JFK to meet Khrushchev and, for his part, President Kennedy was interested in meeting with him. So, on 27 February 1961 Kennedy sent a letter to Khrushchev proposing a summit take place in Vienna, Austria. The premier approved. In early March the two leaders agreed to meet during May in Vienna.

By this time, Khrushchev had already learned from his KGB chief, Aleksandr Shelepin, that the U.S. was preparing for “an economic blockade of and military intervention against Cuba.”<sup>18</sup> On 18 April, the day after the Cuban exile brigade landed on the beachhead at the Bay of Pigs, Khrushchev sent a warning to Kennedy that if the conflict continued “a new conflagration may flare up in another

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 42.

<sup>15</sup> 1/25/61, Kennedy press conference.

<sup>16</sup> Zubok and Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin’s Cold War*, p. 240

<sup>17</sup> Beschloss, *The Crisis Years*, pp. 44-45.

<sup>18</sup> Zubok and Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin’s Cold War*, p. 241.

area”—a transparent reference to West Berlin.<sup>19</sup> Kennedy’s failure in Cuba was a bonus for Khrushchev, who interpreted it as a sign of weakness, validating his view that he could manipulate Kennedy on Berlin. The Vienna Summit was not only on, but also was a Soviet snare.

### **Khrushchev’s May 1961 Secret War Council on Berlin<sup>20</sup>**

Khrushchev had been secretly plotting since March 1961 to close Berlin’s sector borders and build a wall in the city.<sup>21</sup> But Kennedy’s colossal loss at the Bay of Pigs barely ninety days into his presidency played heavily into Khrushchev’s hands. The Soviet leader then decided to play for more and test the president straight away on Western access to Berlin. While publicly feigning a cooperative posture toward JFK, Khrushchev’s plan was to lure the president into a summit meeting and ambush him with an ultimatum on Berlin.

On 26 May 1961, Khrushchev convened a meeting of the Communist Party Presidium for a secret war council. The meeting’s agenda concerned what he planned to do to Kennedy at the Vienna summit. The premier said he relished the opportunity for a summit with that “son of a bitch” Kennedy to bring “the German question” to a head. Only the First Deputy Premier of the Soviet Council of Ministers, Anastas Mikoyan, dared to differ with Khrushchev:

Mikoyan argued that Khrushchev underestimated the American willingness and ability to engage in conventional war over Berlin. ... Khrushchev told those gathered that the United States was the most dangerous of all countries to the Soviets. ... Khrushchev told his comrades that he was prepared to risk war and that he also knew how best to avoid it. He said America’s European allies and world public opinion would restrain Kennedy from responding with nuclear weapons to any change in Berlin’s status. He said de Gaulle and Macmillan would never support an American lurch toward war because they understood that the Soviets’ primary nuclear targets, given the range of Moscow’s missiles, would be in Europe.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> This section is taken from the excellent account in Frederick Kempe, *Berlin 1961—Kennedy, Khrushchev, and the Most Dangerous Place on Earth* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 2011), pp. 205-208. Kempe’s account is based on a stenographic record of the meeting from the AVP-RF—the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives.

<sup>21</sup> Murphy, Kondrashev and Bailey, *Battleground Berlin*, pp. 361-362.

“They are intelligent people, and they understand this,” Khrushchev said, and then he revealed exactly what his plan was.

The Soviet leader informed those present that after issuing a six-month ultimatum to Kennedy in Vienna, he would sign a peace treaty unilaterally with the East German government, to whom he would then turn over all of the access routes to West Berlin:

“We do not encroach on West Berlin, we do not declare a blockade,” he said, thus providing no pretext for military action. “We show that we are ready to permit air traffic but on the condition that Western planes land at airports in the GDR [not in West Berlin]. We do not demand a withdrawal of troops. However, we consider them illegal, though we won’t use any strong-arm methods for their removal. We will not cut off delivery of foodstuffs and will not sever any other lifelines.

Khrushchev concluded, therefore, that this scenario would not “unleash a war.” Only Mikoyan persisted in warning the premier that the probability of war was higher than he estimated:

Khrushchev shot back that Kennedy so feared war that he would not react militarily. *He told the Presidium they perhaps would have to compromise in Laos, Cuba, or the Congo, where the conventional balance was less clear, but around Berlin the Kremlin’s superiority was unquestionable.* Mikoyan countered that Khrushchev was backing Kennedy into a dangerous position where he would have no option but to respond militarily. Mikoyan suggested that Khrushchev continue to allow air traffic to arrive in West Berlin, which might make his Berlin solution more palatable to Kennedy. [Emphasis added]

Khrushchev steamrolled over Mikoyan. He replied that not only would he be willing to shut down the air corridor but would also shoot down any Allied plane that tried to land in West Berlin.

Khrushchev ended his overbearing performance with a discussion of whether he should follow protocol and exchange gifts with Kennedy in Vienna. Foreign Ministry officials suggested he give President Kennedy twelve cans of the finest black caviar and phonographic records of Soviet and Russian music. Among other gifts, his aides had a silver coffee service in mind for Mrs. Kennedy. When the officials asked for Khrushchev’s approval, he responded, “One can exchange presents even before a war.”

## The Ambush of JFK at the Vienna Summit

Khrushchev was shrewd to spring his test of the new president at the Vienna summit. The Pentagon and the CIA were not the only executive agencies in disarray after the Cuban fiasco. In his biography *A Thousand Days*, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., described the feeble state of American diplomacy during the first six months of the Kennedy Administration:

The frustrations of the summer over Berlin brought the president's *discontent with his Department of State to a climax*. One muddle after another—the Department's acquiescence in the Bay of Pigs, the fecklessness of its recommendations after the disaster, the ordeal of trying to change its attitude toward Laos, the maddening delay over the answer to Khrushchev's aide-mémoire<sup>22</sup> and the banality of the result, *the apparent impossibility of developing a negotiating position for Berlin*—left Kennedy with little doubt that the State Department was not yet an instrumentality fully and promptly responsive to presidential purpose.<sup>23</sup> [Emphasis added]

Thus, it was not only Kennedy's youth but also the feebleness of otherwise experienced American diplomats at this critical juncture that gave the wily Soviet premier the element of surprise at the 3-4 June 1961 summit in Vienna.

The 3 June discussion in the American ambassador's office was a preliminary sparring match by both leaders. Schlesinger summed it up this way: "Khrushchev had not given way before Kennedy's reasonableness, nor Kennedy before Khrushchev's intransigence."<sup>24</sup> But Khrushchev had held back. He planned to take the gloves off in the afternoon session the next day at the Soviet Embassy. When the discussion turned to Berlin during the 4 June morning meeting,<sup>25</sup> Khrushchev taunted Kennedy with this belligerent boast: "Berlin is the most dangerous place in the world. The USSR wants to perform an operation on this soft spot to eliminate this thorn, this ulcer." Khrushchev then confronted President Kennedy with this bombshell: the USSR planned to sign a peace treaty with the GDR [East Germany], unilaterally, if necessary, after which "all rights of [Western] access to Berlin will expire because the state of war will cease to exist."

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<sup>22</sup> A formal document Khrushchev presented to Kennedy to make his ultimatum more "formal." Kennedy's officials were not prepared for this tactic.

<sup>23</sup> Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days* (New York: Mariner Books, 2002), p. 406.

<sup>24</sup> Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days* (New York: Mariner Books, 2002), p. 361.

<sup>25</sup> 6/4/61, *FRUS, Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1961-1963, Volume XIV, Berlin Crisis, 1961-1962, Document 32, Memorandum of Conversation—morning discussion.

At this, Kennedy pushed back forcefully, saying Berlin was a primary and vital concern to the United States:

[Kennedy declared] if we abandoned West Berlin, it would mean the abandonment of Western Europe, which America had deemed essential to its security in two wars. ... America, Kennedy said, *would not accept an ultimatum*. [Emphasis added]

As the argument went on endlessly, Khrushchev dug in his heels and became ever harsher. Although the conversation was civil at first, it had turned into a scuffle by lunchtime.

After the luncheon, the discussion turned into a brawl.<sup>26</sup> It began as Kennedy tried to tone down the rhetoric in a final effort to avoid a crisis. He asked to talk with Khrushchev alone, accompanied only by interpreters:

The president began by expressing hope that in the interest of relations between their two countries the chairman would not present him with a crisis so deeply involving the American national interest as Berlin. Of course, any decision Khrushchev wanted to make about the Democratic Republic was his own.

Kennedy worried that no one could predict where the conflict would end and pleaded that “all decisions had to be carefully considered.”

Khrushchev then attacked JFK unrelentingly:

The United States, he said, wanted to humiliate the Soviet Union. If the president insisted on occupation rights after a treaty and if East German borders were violated, whether by land, sea or air, force would be met by force. The United States should prepare itself for this, and the Soviet Union would do the same. “I want peace,” said Khrushchev, “but, if you want war, that is your problem.”

Kennedy shot back: “It is you, and not I, who wants to force a change.” But the premier gave the president no quarter:

Khrushchev said again that it was up to the United States to decide on peace or war. The Soviet Union had no choice but to accept the challenge. It must, and it would, respond. The treaty decision was irrevocable. He would sign in December.

As they parted Kennedy remarked, “It will be a cold winter.”

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<sup>26</sup> 6/4/61, *FRUS*, Volume XIV, Berlin Crisis, 1961-1962, Document 33, Memorandum of Conversation—afternoon discussion.

The Berlin Crisis had obviously reached a new and very dangerous stage. Khrushchev's ultimatum to Kennedy moved Washington into high gear. Although the Soviet premier's bullying had failed to win any concessions from the president, at this point the Americans still had no idea that Khrushchev's original plan—the Berlin Wall—was coming. Khrushchev planned to restrict that secret to only a few people until the very last moment.

Kennedy's secret, which he confided to almost no one, was his fear that Khrushchev *would* move against Berlin. Beschloss argues, correctly in my view, that Khrushchev understood JFK's disquiet:

...it took the chairman and his analysts little effort to notice the diamond in the chandelier. They almost certainly concluded that Kennedy was so uncertain about the American commitment to the divided city that he was willing to brook the humiliation of the Bay of Pigs rather than face a new Berlin crisis now.

With few cards in his hand to play against the West, Khrushchev “could now conclude that Berlin might serve nicely.”<sup>27</sup>

## **Khrushchev and Berlin—Wedded at the Hip**

At the 20th anniversary celebration of Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union on 21 June 1961, Khrushchev was feted for his leadership of the Berlin Crisis—even though he knew the summit had been a failure.<sup>28</sup> The Soviet premier wore his wartime lieutenant general's uniform while those participating watched a documentary film about Khrushchev's life as a military and political champion. Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin extolled Khrushchev as “the pioneer explorer of the cosmic age.” The event was televised:

The Soviet leader received another Order of Lenin and a third golden hammer-and-sickle medal for “guiding the creation and development of the rocket industry ... which opened a new era in the conquest of space.” Khrushchev decorated seven thousand others who had contributed to the flight. To consolidate personal alliances and neutralize rivals, he gave Orders of Lenin to his Politburo ally Leonid Brezhnev and to a potential rival at the [upcoming] October Party Congress, Frol Kozlov.

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<sup>27</sup> Beschloss, *The Crisis Years*, p. 150.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 238.

As former *Wall Street Journal* reporter and editor Frederick Kempe has observed, Khrushchev was a calculating politician protecting his flanks before acting on Berlin.<sup>29</sup>

Unsuccessful at the Vienna summit, Khrushchev's pompous demonstration at this anniversary celebration was an act. He condemned the Western refusal to compromise on Berlin. Yet Khrushchev knew that he had refused to compromise while Kennedy had signaled he was ready to negotiate. The premier also knew that the USSR could not keep pace with American military development. His declaration that the USSR's military strength would grow so much that the West would suffer complete failure was no more than an empty boast.

As Soviet military heroes and commanders lavished praise upon Khrushchev, he pretended to double down on Berlin:

The historic truth is that during the assault on Berlin there was not a single American, British, or French armed soldier around it, except for the prisoners of war whom we freed. Thus, he said, the Allies' claims to special rights in Berlin so long after surrender are entirely unfounded.

As the crowd cheered, Defense Minister Rodion Malinovsky said the U.S. "gigantic military apparatus" and "aggressive blocks" ringing the Soviet Union had to be resisted.<sup>30</sup>

Khrushchev's Berlin battle cry was little more than a propaganda stunt in advance of the October Party Congress. He did not want war. He needed a compromise on Berlin and, more than ever, he needed the American president in order to make it work.

## **The Washington Reaction to the Vienna Summit**

Kennedy had suspected that he would have to face more mischief from Khrushchev over Berlin. The president understood that the costs of unilateral U.S. intervention in Cuba for the cause of freedom throughout the hemisphere far outweighed Castro's continued presence. But Kennedy advisor Theodore Sorensen suggested that there was another imperative at work in Kennedy's ardent refusal to send American forces into Cuba. The president envisaged this scenario taking place:

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<sup>29</sup> Kempe, *Berlin 1961*, pp. 277-278.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 278-279.

American conventional forces ... were still below strength, and while an estimated half of our available Army combat divisions were tied down resisting guerrillas in the Cuban mountains, *the communists could have been on the move in Berlin* or elsewhere in the world.<sup>31</sup> [Emphasis added]

And so, those forces were not tied down in Cuba, the Congo, or Laos when Khrushchev sprung his Berlin bluff on Kennedy at the summit. The president was fully aware, however, that—short of using nuclear weapons—U.S. force levels were inadequate to deal with the developing Berlin crisis.

Thus, Kennedy responded to Khrushchev's ultimatum by ordering his administration to undertake a comprehensive review of the situation and make recommendations on the political and military measures to convince the Soviet Union that he meant business in Berlin. To help him lead this effort the president sought out President Truman's Secretary of State, Dean Acheson. Dean Acheson had turned down the president-elect's offer to be ambassador to NATO; the only appointment he would have accepted was his previous one—Secretary of State. That changed when the administration had begun to consider its Berlin policy well before the president went to the Vienna Summit. When Kennedy asked Acheson to advise him on Berlin, Acheson's secretary noted that he was "buoyed up by it all and looks better and younger than I have seen him in years."<sup>32</sup>

On 9 February 1961, Kennedy announced that Acheson would be coming to Washington to lead special studies on the problems of NATO, Germany, and balancing the use of conventional and nuclear weapons in future contingencies. Arthur Schlesinger recalled that although the president knew Acheson was a hardliner, he nevertheless considered him "one of the most intelligent and experienced men around and did not see why he should not avail himself of hardline views before making his own judgments."<sup>33</sup>

I will describe the recommendations of the Acheson report for the Berlin Crisis shortly, but I want to mention here a controversial hardline suggestion that the CIA had been opposed to since March. Acheson believed that the Soviets might be deterred if they could be convinced that the crisis would result in "greater instability—rather than stability" in Eastern Europe:

The U.S. should try to convince the USSR that it would and could, in event of a Berlin crisis, stir up dissidence in East Germany and Eastern Europe.

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<sup>31</sup> Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009 edition), p. 297.

<sup>32</sup> Beschloss, *The Crisis Years*, p. 242.

<sup>33</sup> Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days* (New York: Mariner Books, 2002), p. 380.

... We can only convince the Soviets that this is our intention if that is, in fact, the case. As in the military field, bogus preparations will be of little value. ... The scale of civil disorder which we set out to stimulate should correspond, progressively, to the intensity of the crisis.

A full-scale revolt, the secretary counseled, should only be triggered if the crisis reaches the point of “a hair's breadth from general war.”<sup>34</sup>

In a previous section of this chapter, I mentioned the March 1961 Berlin survey, and that its final section contained the unrealistic suggestion for fomenting an “insurrection” in East Germany. On that occasion, Dave Murphy from Berlin Operations Base (BOB) attended a meeting of East European Division (EED) officers. Given the high efficiency of the East German police state,<sup>35</sup> the group had concluded that it was not possible to incite a popular uprising in East Germany.<sup>36</sup>

In a meeting at CIA HQS on 22 June 1961, former BOB chief Bill Harvey<sup>37</sup> harshly criticized the concept of mounting clandestine operations in the east:

It is unrealistic to believe that we could infiltrate into the East Zone a sleeper net of sufficient size, reliability, and skill to ... play a significant part in organizing resistance groups as well as remain in a state of readiness until called up in connection with military operations. Our abilities are not equal to this task when balanced against the defensive capability of the [East German] Ministry of State Security.

There was virtually unanimous agreement with Harvey's statement within the EED.<sup>38</sup>

Meanwhile, according to the CIA chronology of the 1961 Berlin Crisis, on 25 June, the U.S. Navy's Director of Submarine Warfare, Rear Admiral Joseph Gallatin, reported that American Polaris class submarines with their nuclear tipped missiles were “trained on the USSR.”<sup>39</sup> The chronology did not specify whether or not Gallatin's report was public. At that time, it probably was not. It was, however, a revealing indication of just how serious the Berlin Crisis had become.

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<sup>34</sup> 6/28/61, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Volume XIV, Berlin Crisis, 1961-1962, Document 49, Report by Dean Acheson.

<sup>35</sup> John O Koehler. *Stasi: The Untold Story of The East German Secret Police* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999), pp. 8-9.

<sup>36</sup> Murphy, Kondrashev and Bailey, *Battleground Berlin*, p. 357.

<sup>37</sup> At the time, Bill Harvey was working in a CIA signals intelligence support component—Foreign Intelligence, Staff D (FI/D).

<sup>38</sup> Murphy, Kondrashev and Bailey, *Battleground Berlin*, p. 366.

<sup>39</sup> CIA Berlin Chronology, 1961; [cia.gov/library](http://cia.gov/library).

## The 29 June 1961 NSC Meeting

On 29 June 1961, President Kennedy called the National Security Council (NSC) to the Cabinet Room to consider Acheson's report on Berlin. Secretary of State Rusk began the discussion with a summary account of the current state of the department's work on Khrushchev's 4 June aide-mémoire, and on other pressing matters relevant to Berlin planning. Rusk then asked Secretary Acheson to discuss his report. Acheson began by arguing that Khrushchev's purpose in starting this crisis over Berlin was to weaken NATO, buttress the East German regime, and legalize the Oder-Neisse Line with Poland.<sup>40</sup> The Soviet leader had confronted the U.S. with a test that could not be backed down from, Acheson averred, because Khrushchev would take willingness to negotiate as a sign of weakness.<sup>41</sup>

Kennedy said, wryly, that he thought it difficult to sustain a strong political posture, while, at the same time, being prepared with the right answer if Khrushchev proposed another summit that summer. This was Acheson's humorous reply:

In reply to a summit proposal, for example, the president could readily suggest that conversations be undertaken first at a lower level. Mr. Acheson believed that there were plenty of "elderly unemployed" people like himself who could be sent to interminable meetings.

Acheson added that the U.S. could converse indefinitely without negotiating at all, and that he could easily do this himself "for three months on end."<sup>42</sup>

In his report, Acheson had argued that the entire position of the U.S. hung in the balance. "Until this conflict of wills is resolved," he declared, "an attempt to solve the Berlin issue by negotiation is worse than a waste of time and energy." Acheson said it was necessary to shift Khrushchev's thinking and leave him with no doubt that the president's hardline response to any move on Berlin would be so tough that Khrushchev would not take the risk:

[Acheson] wanted the president to declare a national emergency and order a rapid buildup in American nuclear as well as conventional forces. He said American forces in Germany outside Berlin should be reinforced immediately by two or three divisions, to a total of six. The underlying

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<sup>40</sup> The Soviet Union had recognized this boundary as the East German frontier.

<sup>41</sup> 6/29/61, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Volume XIV, Berlin Crisis, 1961-1962, Document 52, Memorandum for the Record, NSC Meeting.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

message: If anyone was to back down over Berlin, it would have to be the Soviets.

As I mentioned previously, the Acheson report also included a plan to deter the Soviets from provoking a Berlin crisis by stirring up dissident groups to destabilize Eastern Europe.<sup>43</sup>

Some of those present in the NSC meeting were troubled by Acheson's apparent indifference about the risk of nuclear war. They preferred negotiation to demonstrate that the West favored a reduction in tension over West Berlin while protecting Western access rights.<sup>44</sup> The president said very little during the meeting, except that he did not think the American people were prepared for the ambitious course Acheson proposed and, furthermore, that the allies would be even less enthusiastic.<sup>45</sup> Uncharacteristically, the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Arleigh Burke, voiced his opposition<sup>46</sup> to the scale of the action proposed by Acheson and his opposition to an airlift unconnected with a probe. Acheson responded that the military force had to be large enough to convince the Soviets that if the fighting continued, nuclear weapons would be used.<sup>47</sup>

The upshot of the meeting was a decision *not* to make any substantive decisions based on that first discussion. The president directed his security advisor, McGeorge Bundy, to prepare a list of departmental assignments for proposals that could be tabled for further discussion and decisions in two weeks.<sup>48</sup> The day after the NSC meeting, 30 June 1961, Bundy's list became National Security Action Memorandum 58.<sup>49</sup> Defense Secretary McNamara was directed to submit recommendations on the magnitude of a permanent increase in the size of the U.S. military forces. He was also directed to create a capability for:

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<sup>43</sup> Kempe, *Berlin 1961*, pp. 281-282.

<sup>44</sup> Beschloss, *The Crisis Years*, p. 243.

<sup>45</sup> Kempe, *Berlin 1961*, p. 282.

<sup>46</sup> Burke had been in the Pentagon cabal that attempted to manipulate the president into sending U.S. forces into Cuba to support the exile invasion. Burke had personally—and unsuccessfully—confronted Kennedy in the oval office while the exile forces were still fighting on the beachhead at the Bay of Pigs. Burke didn't get the message. Two weeks later, after Kennedy refused to send U.S. forces into Laos, Burke again personally confronted Kennedy in the White House over that decision. Kennedy threw him out of his office. See John Newman, *JFK and Vietnam*, Second Edition (Amazon: Create Space, 2017), p. 28. Apparently, Burke finally got the message. By the time of the 29 June 1961 NSC meeting, Burke was just hoping to hold on to his job. He was in no mood to stick his neck out again.

<sup>47</sup> 6/29/61, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Volume XIV, Berlin Crisis, 1961-1962, Document 52, Memorandum for the Record, NSC Meeting.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> 6/30/61, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Volume XIV, Berlin Crisis, 1961-1962, Document 53, National Security Action Memorandum No. 58.

- A garrison and civilian Quadripartite Berlin Airlift (QBAL) by 15 October
- Naval harassment and blockade of Bloc shipping by 15 November
- Large scale non-nuclear ground action within four months of such time after 15 October as it may be ordered—with tactical air support, as necessary—assuming appropriate use of forces in Europe and assuming reinforcement from the U.S. as necessary to permit the use of two, four, six, and twelve divisions in Europe
- Keeping SAC (Strategic Air Command) in a state of maximum readiness for flexible use over a prolonged period of crisis

Secretary of State Rusk and DCI Dulles were directed to submit joint recommendations for preparations to create a capability for inciting progressively increasing instability in East Germany and Eastern Europe to be activated, if necessary, after 15 October.<sup>50</sup>

This last directive was given to a mismatched pair of agency chiefs. As I mentioned before, with respect to proposals to use clandestine operations to incite insurrection in the East, the CIA had been at odds with the State Department hawks since at least March 1961.

## **The Schism in Washington on Berlin Policy**

Kennedy saw his administration breaking into two camps on the Berlin predicament. Frederick Kempe summarized the divide in this way: “The first [group] was becoming known as the Hard-Liners on Berlin and the other had been disparagingly labeled by the hawks in the room as the SLOBs, or the Soft-Liners on Berlin.” The hard-liners included Acheson and other lesser lights at the State Department, the chiefs at the Pentagon, and Vice President Johnson. The SLOBs were a “formidable group” personally closer to Kennedy. They included U.S. Ambassador to the USSR, Llewellyn Thompson; Kennedy’s adviser on Soviet affairs, Charles Bohlen; White House aide Arthur Schlesinger; White House consultant and Harvard professor Henry Kissinger; special counsel Ted Sorensen; Kennedy security advisor McGeorge Bundy; and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. After the NSC meeting, Schlesinger began to organize a plan to provide a “thinking man’s alternative” to Acheson.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Kempe, *Berlin 1961*, p. 283.

An aside for a few observations is in order here. The 1961 Berlin Crisis leadership alignment in the Kennedy Administration was not lost on the chiefs at the Pentagon. In the ten weeks before the Bay of Pigs fiasco, their boss, Secretary McNamara, was more inclined to take their advice, but less so afterward. In a 1964 interview with Schlesinger, McNamara explained it this way: “I think I learned a lesson I had learned many times before, and that was never to rely on the advice anybody gives me on anything.”<sup>52</sup> The divide at the Pentagon deepened during the 1961 Berlin Crisis and it would become permanent after Kennedy increased the American advisory role in the Vietnam War at the end of 1961.

Notably absent from the two groups listed by Kempe was the CIA leadership. Disgraced by their Cuban performance, their advice was not welcome in the White House. Another telling absence from the group close to Kennedy was Secretary of State Rusk. In my book *JFK and Vietnam* (2017 edition), I concluded that the president did not trust Rusk enough to include him in the plan to withdraw the American advisors from Vietnam.

In any event, that same week in early July 1961, *Newsweek* published classified information on the Pentagon’s contingency plans for Berlin, including the mobilization of American military forces. Khrushchev used this news to justify the recension of his plan to reduce the Soviet Army by 1.2 million men and increase his defense budget by \$3.4 billion. According to Kempe, Kennedy was “livid” over the *Newsweek* leak and so upset that he ordered the FBI to find the source.<sup>53</sup> Beschloss expressed another view: “Like the transcripts of the Vienna talks, the president or his aides may have themselves authorized the leak—in this case, to send a stiff alarm to Khrushchev.”<sup>54</sup> In his study of Kennedy, Robert Dallek agrees that the president probably leaked the story “to send Khrushchev an unmistakable message.”<sup>55</sup>

Khrushchev got the message. In a Moscow speech, he scoffed at “reports” of Western mobilization plans. But he was anything but untroubled. At the end of the first week in July, aware that Britain was the weakest supporter of a tough line on Berlin, Khrushchev pulled a sobering prank on Sir Frank Roberts, the British Ambassador to the USSR. Both were attending a performance by Dame Margot Fonteyn at the Bolshoi Theater.

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<sup>52</sup> 4/4/64, Robert McNamara Oral History Interview by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., JFK Library, JFKOH-RSM-01.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, pp. 305-306.

<sup>54</sup> Beschloss, *The Crisis Years*, p. 244.

<sup>55</sup> Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life, John F. Kennedy, 1917-1963* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2003) (paperback), p. 421.

Khrushchev summoned Roberts to his box and warned that resistance to his German peace treaty was pointless. If the Western powers sent a new division to Germany, he warned, the Soviet Union would respond “a hundredfold.”<sup>56</sup> The Soviet leader blustered that it would only take six hydrogen bombs to destroy Britain and that nine would take care of France. Khrushchev then asked Roberts, “Why should two hundred million people die for two million Berliners?”<sup>57</sup>

## **The Decision to Build the Berlin Wall**

One thing JFK agreed with Acheson about was *not* to agree to another summer summit with Khrushchev. JFK had had enough. He would never meet with Khrushchev again. With East Germany’s refugee problem spiraling out of control, Khrushchev could no longer wait for an answer on a meeting with Kennedy. East German refugees who got to West Berlin faced the risk of being arrested for desertion if they travelled by bus or train to West Germany. However, they were able to fly unmolested to West Germany from airports in West Berlin.

The Soviet Presidium met on 29 June and considered the request of East German leader Walter Ulbricht to do something about the “border-crosser” problem. Soviet Ambassador Pervukhin argued that once a peace treaty had been signed, control of Western access to West Berlin would be in East German hands.

...the goal would be to have all external air traffic from West Berlin channeled through the East Berlin airport at Schönefeld, effectively giving the East control of who was permitted to leave by air. Refugees from the GDR would be marooned in West Berlin.

Unable to leave West Berlin by any means, East Germans would be stuck in West Berlin indefinitely, and the half-city would be unable to cope with a permanent influx. This, Pervukhin felt, would solve the refugee problem and so weaken West Berlin “that it would fall into the East’s lap.”<sup>58</sup>

Physically closing Berlin’s sector borders posed technical problems and the risk of military conflict. But Ulbricht had given Khrushchev an ominous warning:

...the situation in the GDR was growing visibly worse. The growing flood of refugees was increasingly disorganizing the entire life of the Republic.

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<sup>56</sup> Kempe, *Berlin 1961*, p. 306. See also, 7/6/61, “British Envoy Tells Khrushchev Soviet Policy on Berlin is Illegal,” *New York Herald Tribune*.

<sup>57</sup> Beschloss, *The Crisis Years*, p. 244.

<sup>58</sup> Taylor, *The Berlin Wall, The Berlin Wall: August 13, 1961 - November 9, 1989* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), pp. 138-139.

Soon it must lead to an explosion. If something was not done, then East Germany's collapse was "inevitable."<sup>59</sup>

Khrushchev did not need to be warned. For some time, he had concluded that the refugee problem was urgent.

Berlin was an open city. For Ulbricht and the East German leadership, the open status of the city caused two severe problems, Khrushchev recalled in a book about his recollections, *Khrushchev Remembers*.<sup>60</sup> First, there was the problem of the people crossing from East Berlin into West Berlin:

The GDR had to cope with an enemy who was economically very powerful and therefore very appealing to the GDR's own citizens. ... An East German with adequate professional qualifications had no difficulty finding a job if he moved to West Germany. The resulting drain of workers was creating a simply disastrous situation in the GDR, which was already suffering from a shortage of manual labor, not to mention specialized labor.

The second problem was the result of West Berliner's easy access to East Berlin:

Residents of West Berlin could cross freely into East Berlin, where they took advantage of all sorts of communal services like barbershops and so on. Because prices were much lower in East Berlin, West Berliners were also buying up all sorts of products which were in wide demand—products like meat, animal oil, and other items, and the GDR was losing millions of marks.

Khrushchev told his son Sergei that in early July 1961 he asked his German commander-in-chief, General Ivan Yakubovski, to do a study on the feasibility of closing the border between the Western and Eastern sectors of Berlin. The two men studied special maps of Berlin at Khrushchev's Dacha in the Crimea.<sup>61</sup>

In July 1961, fear that the West Berlin safety hatch might disappear caused the refugee outflow to balloon to even more disastrous proportions—*one thousand people every day*.<sup>62</sup> It was during those July days at his Dacha that Khrushchev made up his mind to build the Berlin Wall. He concluded that "If the GDR was to be saved, something had to happen quickly." The wall project was codenamed "Rose." Super-secret handwritten progress reports were hand-carried to

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Edward Crankshaw *Khrushchev Remembers* (New York: Little, Brown and Company: 1970), pp. 454-455.

<sup>61</sup> Taylor, *The Berlin Wall*, pp. 138-139.

<sup>62</sup> 8/15/61, Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE) 12-4-61, "Stability of East Germany in the Berlin Crisis," [cia.gov/library](http://cia.gov/library).

Ambassador Pervukhin by a single designated courier, and then forwarded on to Moscow via courier. No telephone or radio transmissions were permitted.<sup>63</sup>

The U.S. remained focused like a laser on the crisis of *Western access* to Berlin. At the Soviet Embassy in Berlin, however, Pervukhin had a much sharper focus on the crisis of the *exploding refugee flow*, and the predicament of pursuing a peace treaty while that flow intensified.<sup>64</sup> In that difference of focus there was a seed for a trade—and the potential abatement of the Berlin Crisis.

### **The 13 July 1961 NSC Meeting**

In support of the 13 July NSC meeting, two days earlier the intelligence community gathered at CIA HQS for final coordination of a Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE) on possible Soviet reactions to U.S. options with respect to Berlin.<sup>65</sup> The SNIE offered this prediction:

The Soviet leaders are confident of the prospects for advancing their cause by means short of all-out war. We continue to believe that, so long as they remain vulnerable to U.S. strategic power, they will not willingly enter into a situation which, by their calculations, the risks of general war are substantial.

The Army intelligence representative at the coordination meeting took a footnote to add this fragment to the second sentence: “and will endeavor to draw back from such situations [i.e. general war] should they evolve.”

In a paragraph devoted to “measures aimed at the Satellites,” the SNIE stated that the Soviets probably believed the West had only a limited capability to stir up dissidence in East Germany. The SNIE predicted that overt Western actions to stimulate dissidence would probably produce a stiffening of Soviet resolve. Yet the SNIE then added this analysis:

If, however, private Western warning and clandestine activities convinced Moscow that a Berlin crisis could provoke a *covertly supported* wave of disorders in the Satellites, then the Soviets might be inclined to proceed more cautiously in their moves against Berlin. [Emphasis added]

In their 1997 book, *Battleground Berlin*, Dave Murphy and co-authors Sergei Kondrashev and George Baily criticized this finding, and argued that “this naïve

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<sup>63</sup> Taylor, *The Berlin Wall*, pp. 140-142.

<sup>64</sup> Murphy, Kondrashev and Bailey, *Battleground Berlin*, p. 367.

<sup>65</sup> 7/11/61, SNIE 2-2-61, “Soviet and other Reactions to Possible U.S. Courses of action with Respect to Berlin, [cia.gov/library](http://cia.gov/library).

faith in ‘sending the Soviets a signal’ was misplaced in the Berlin situation.”<sup>66</sup> Two SNIEs released in August 1961 would also pour cold water on the prospects for clandestine incitement of uprisings in Central Europe.<sup>67</sup>

The record of the discussion at the 13 July NSC meeting indicates Secretary Rusk began the discussion by pointing out that “the Khrushchev timetable is not under our control.”<sup>68</sup> When the subject of a declaration of national emergency arose, Rusk warned that to do it “at this time would have a dangerous sound of mobilization.”

In his 1986 Department of Defense oral history, Secretary McNamara explained why he felt it had been important to call up the reserves:

In the case of Berlin, I favored calling up the reserves for two reasons: (1) we needed to make clear to the Soviets our determination and will to apply force if necessary to prevent them from taking over West Berlin, which was their objective, and (2) if we were going to apply force, we needed to have that additional force available.<sup>69</sup>

At the 13 July 1961 NSC meeting, the president asked Acheson what he thought about calling up the reserves. Acheson replied that if they left the call-up of reserves until “the end,” Khrushchev’s judgment about the shape of the crisis would not be affected. Secretary Rusk agreed that reserve training should not be left until too late. Acheson proposed that it begin in August.<sup>70</sup>

During further discussion, Acheson pressed vigorously—with Vice President Johnson’s backing—for the president to support a full program of “decisive action.” Others present pushed back. They argued that taking such action at that time might jeopardize the foreign aid bill then awaiting congressional authorization and appropriation. Rusk commented that it would be “a great victory for Khrushchev” if he could weaken the foreign aid program with only a memorandum and a few speeches. Acheson urged the president to move forward with a full Berlin program and to make a speech to the nation “the week after next.”

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<sup>66</sup> Murphy, Kondrashev and Bailey, *Battleground Berlin*, p. 367.

<sup>67</sup> 8/15/61, SNIE 12-4-61, “Stability of East Germany in the Berlin Crisis,” [cia.gov/library](http://cia.gov/library); 8/24/61, SNIE 11-10-61, “Soviet Tactics in the Berlin Crisis,” *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Volume XIV, Berlin Crisis, 1961-1962, Document 113.

<sup>68</sup> 7/13/61, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, volume XIV, Berlin Crisis, 1961-1962, Document 66, Memorandum for the Record, NSC Meeting. See also Document 67, Notes on the National Security Council Meeting, made by General Lemnitzer.

<sup>69</sup> 4/3/86, McNamara DOD Oral History, Part II—p. 19, LBJ Library.

<sup>70</sup> 7/13/61, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, volume XIV, Berlin Crisis, 1961-1962, Document 66, Memorandum for the Record, NSC Meeting. See also Document 67, Notes on the National Security Council Meeting, made by General Lemnitzer.

Once again, as it was at the 29 June NSC meeting, no clear decision was reached on these matters. The bucket was kicked down the road for “further discussion at the next meeting.” At the 18 July meeting of the Interdepartmental Coordination Group on Germany and Berlin, Kennedy’s team debated the merits of a rapid, spectacular build-up versus a slower build-up. Once again, the pros and cons of declaring a national emergency, modernizing U.S. conventional forces, and troop deployments were discussed.<sup>71</sup>

Later that day, the president attended a meeting of his senior military advisors on Berlin.<sup>72</sup> Kennedy said he wanted to postpone the declaration of a state of emergency until American reserve forces had been mobilized. The chiefs agreed and said it could be postponed until at least 1 September. When Kennedy asked if the additional U.S. combat-ready divisions could be used effectively without further strengthening of Allied forces, General Lemnitzer replied, “No.” He added that the expected increases in Allied forces would provide NATO with a better capability for non-nuclear ground action.

### **The 19 July 1961 NSC Meeting**

The president met with the Berlin Steering Group on the morning of 19 July in his study on the second floor of the Executive Mansion.<sup>73</sup> Secretary McNamara described the military program and stated it was not necessary to declare a national emergency before mobilization. He added that congressional authorization could be obtained for the reserve call-up without such a declaration. Kennedy asked whether the proposed military build-up would increase the credibility of the U.S. nuclear deterrent. McNamara replied that it would.

At the NSC meeting that afternoon, the president again emphasized his own view that the proposed U.S. preparations would not be adequate without an effective allied response, especially from the Germans and the French.

And then, as Kempe has observed, the Acheson plan died a quiet death after an exchange between its author and Defense Secretary McNamara.<sup>74</sup> Acheson wanted a declaration of national emergency and a call-up of the reserves not later

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<sup>71</sup> 7/18/61, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Volume XIV, Berlin Crisis, 1961-1962, Document 74, Memorandum of a Conversation.

<sup>72</sup> 7/18/61, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Volume XIV, Berlin Crisis, 1961-1962, Document 75, Memorandum of a Meeting on Berlin.

<sup>73</sup> 7/19/61, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Volume XIV, Berlin Crisis, 1961-1962, Document 77, Memorandum of Minutes of the National Security Council Meeting.

<sup>74</sup> Kempe, *Berlin 1961*, p. 311.

than September. Secretary McNamara opposed a fixed target date, on the grounds that it would be wrong to accept a rigid time-table in advance. After some prodding by the president, it was clear that the current preparations would rapidly create a force in being, in the continental U.S., of six Army and two Marine divisions that could be deployed to Europe in the event of a rapidly developing crisis. Acheson acquiesced, and the president's decisions developing from these matters were recorded by McGeorge Bundy in National Security Action Memorandum No. 62.<sup>75</sup>

By the summer of 1961, the Berlin Crisis had evolved into the most dangerous flashpoint for a nuclear conflict since the onset of the Cold War. Robert Dallek concisely summed up the moment:

It tested Kennedy's ability to strike an effective balance between intimidating the Soviets and giving them a way out of their dilemma. How could Moscow halt the migration from East to West, which threatened the collapse of East Germany, without altering existing U.S. treaty rights of unfettered access to Berlin and pushing Washington toward war?<sup>76</sup>

Schlesinger recalled that the president was "fighting his way through the thicket of debate to his own conclusions." Cuba and Laos were side issues, "But Berlin threatened a war which might destroy civilization, and he thought about little else that summer."<sup>77</sup>

## **President Kennedy's 25 July 1961 Television Address**

Several of the president's aides helped him draft his television address. One of his principal concerns was the perception that he lacked the will to fight an all-out war. Robert Kennedy learned from his Soviet military intelligence source in the Soviet Embassy that the ambassador, Mikhail Menshikov, had privately told Khrushchev that Kennedy "didn't amount to very much, didn't have much courage." RFK dismissed this slight. But U.S. press reports, probably leaked by Pentagon sources to pressure JFK about Menshikov's opinion, were unhelpful to the president's Berlin strategy. Acheson didn't help much either. Sore because Kennedy had made it clear he would not be strictly following Acheson's advice, the former secretary told the Berlin working group, "Gentlemen, you might as well

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<sup>75</sup> 7/19/61, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Volume XIV, Berlin Crisis, 1961-1962, Document 77, Memorandum of Minutes of the National Security Council Meeting.

<sup>76</sup> Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life, John F. Kennedy, 1917-1963* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2003), p. 418.

<sup>77</sup> Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days* (New York: Mariner Books, 2002), p. 391.

face it. This nation is without leadership.” McGeorge Bundy believed it was essential for the president to overcome this perception of weakness.<sup>78</sup>

Kennedy’s maneuvering to avoid the intrinsic risks of hardline nuclear missile-rattling *and* a negotiations-at-all-costs stance exposed him to criticism from both sides.<sup>79</sup> The president complained to Schlesinger that Acheson was lopsidedly focused on military solutions and tasked Schlesinger with writing a paper to bring balance to bear on Berlin planning. After working with State Department counselor Abram Chayes and Harvard professor Henry Kissinger, Schlesinger delivered a memo to Kennedy just two hours later, as he was leaving for a weekend in Hyannis Port with Rusk, McNamara and General Taylor. The memo proposed that the president direct Rusk to explore negotiations and order Acheson to inject “the missing political dimension” to his argument.<sup>80</sup>

Speaking from the Oval Office on 25 July 1961, Kennedy addressed the nation on radio and television. His speech turned out to be a skillful model of how to give something to both sides of the Berlin debate in his administration. But it was much more than that. His address was a warning to America and the world that the immediate threat to world freedom was in West Berlin:

For West Berlin, lying exposed 110 miles inside East Germany, surrounded by Soviet troops and close to Soviet supply lines, has many roles. It is more than a showcase of liberty, a symbol, an island of freedom in a communist sea. It is more than a link with the free world, a beacon of hope behind the Iron Curtain, an escape hatch for refugees. West Berlin is all that. But above all it 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.<sup>81</sup>

Kennedy said the U.S. was not looking for war and that he recognized the “Soviet Union's historical concerns about their security in central and eastern Europe.”

The president stated he was willing to renew talks. But he warned, “We cannot and will not permit the communists to drive us out of Berlin, either gradually or by force.” Kennedy announced that he would immediately ask

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid. p. 423.

<sup>79</sup> Taylor, *The Berlin Wall*, pp. 131-132.

<sup>80</sup> Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life, John F. Kennedy, 1917-1963* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2003), p. 421.

<sup>81</sup> 7/25/61, *The American Presidency Project*, JFK Radio and Television Report to the American People on the Berlin Crisis.

Congress for an additional \$3.25 billion for new military spending—\$1.8 billion for non-nuclear weapons, ammunition, and equipment, and \$200 million for civil defense.<sup>82</sup>

## The Berlin Wall

On Monday, 31 July 1961, the leader of East Germany, Walter Ulbricht, attended a meeting in Moscow. He suggested to Khrushchev that the air corridors between West Berlin and the West should be blocked to stanch the huge flow of refugees flying out every day. Khrushchev, saying that it might provoke war, refused. Once again, Ulbricht pleaded that the Berlin sector border be closed. Khrushchev told him to wait until the Warsaw Pact leadership conference, scheduled to meet on 2 September.<sup>83</sup>

At the Warsaw Pact meeting, Ulbricht cautioned Khrushchev that if the drain of valuable East German workers and professionals was not stopped, East Germany would not be able to meet its production commitments to the Soviet bloc. Ulbricht warned that unrest was everywhere and added, “An uprising like the one that nearly toppled his government in 1953 could succeed this time.” The refugee problem, he declared, must be solved “here and now.”<sup>84</sup>

Khrushchev said he would agree to a border closing only if Ulbricht could promise that East Germany’s security forces could preserve order and that its economy could survive. Ulbricht rushed to East Berlin to seek the necessary assurances from his security chief, Erich Honecker, and other top leaders. On 5 September, Ulbricht returned to Moscow to give Khrushchev the news. The next day, Khrushchev disclosed his consent first to the Soviet Ambassador to East Germany, Mikhail Pervukhin, who ordered his aide, Yuli Kvitsinsky, to relay this news to Ulbricht: “We have a yes from Moscow,” Pervukhin said.<sup>85</sup> All communication had to be transmitted orally until just before construction of the wall began.

On 12 August, Ulbricht signed the order to close the border crossings to the West and erect a wall in Berlin. In the darkness at midnight, police and army units—including units of the East German Army—began laying concertina wire and erecting barricades at the main crossing points. By morning, the border to

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<sup>82</sup> CIA Berlin Chronology, 1961; [cia.gov/library](http://cia.gov/library). General LeMay's 12 July appeal for retention of the B-52 and B-58 production levels and for an increase in B-70 program funding was not reflected in these appropriations figures.

<sup>83</sup> Beschloss, *The Crisis Years*, p. 266.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> Kempe, *Berlin 1961*, p. 293.

West Berlin was sealed. Then, 32,000 combat and engineer troops were brought in to begin building the Berlin Wall, while the Soviet Army stood watch close to the city to discourage Western interference. Within a few weeks these improvised obstacles would become a formidable heavily fortified, guarded, and booby-trapped cement barrier.<sup>86</sup>

Publicly, Kennedy's reaction was low key as his administration mulled over what a fully coordinated response should be. The lack of a quick forceful response disappointed West Berlin's mayor, Willy Brandt, who believed that Kennedy had "thrown us in the frying pan." American reporters were saying that the border closure had shocked and depressed Kennedy. However, the president was actually relieved by the news of the wall and, privately, did not hide this reaction from his closest advisors. Frederick Kempe has explained how different the truth was from the press reports:

He considered the border closure a potentially positive turning point that could help lead to the end of the Berlin Crisis ... "Why would Khrushchev put up a wall if he really intended to seize West Berlin?" Kennedy said to his friend and aide Kenny O'Donnell. "There wouldn't be any need of a wall if he planned to occupy the whole city. This is his way out of his predicament. It's not a very nice solution, but a wall is a hell of a lot better than a war."

Besides, the optics for the communists were terrible—they were building a prison around West Berlin to lock in its people. As Kempe observed, "Nothing could have been more damning."<sup>87</sup>

Moreover, Khrushchev's Berlin Wall strategy played into Kennedy's hands. A reasoned but forceful American response was called for. It was an opportunity for the president to display resolve and statesmanship. On 30 August, President Kennedy responded forcefully. He ordered 148,000 Guardsmen and Reservists to active duty. Kennedy was now able to undertake an impressive mobilization of American military power with the full backing of Congress, without looking like a warmonger.

JFK's initial reactions came swiftly. On 18 August 1961, he ordered a battle group of 1,500 men to Berlin to reinforce the garrison. The next day, a plane carrying Vice President Johnson and General Clay landed in Berlin to assure West Berlin that the U.S. was willing to fight for the city's survival. On 20 August, the

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<sup>86</sup> Taylor, *The Berlin Wall*, p. xix.

<sup>87</sup> Kempe, *Berlin 1961*, p. 379.

American battle group arrived in Berlin after having moved over the autobahn. After that, the U.S. and the USSR engaged in a tit-for-tat escalation of the crisis.<sup>88</sup>

On 22 August, the Western air corridors to Berlin were threatened by Soviet diplomatic demarches, and the access to East Berlin was cut to a single crossing point, Check Point Charlie. On 23 August, all people in West Berlin were warned by the East German communists to stay 100 meters from the Wall. The Allies immediately deployed 1000 troops, backed by 10 tanks, at the Wall in defiance of the 100-meter rule.<sup>89</sup> On 30 August, Robert Kennedy remarked that the Soviets “feel strongly that if they can break our will in Berlin then we will never be able to be good for anything else and they will have won the battle in 1961.”<sup>90</sup>

The Soviets reacted by deploying tanks in all towns close to the border, and on 31 August, the Soviet Union announced resumption of nuclear tests and exploded its first nuclear devices on 1 September. On 5 September, President Kennedy announced resumption of U.S. tests, and the U.S. conducted its first test on 15 September. On 23 September the U.S. 7th Army was placed on a “combat ready” alert. On 25 September, President Kennedy, in an address to the UN General Assembly, reaffirmed U.S. determination to defend the Allied position in West Berlin.<sup>91</sup>

## **Tank Confrontation at Check Point Charlie**

On 25 October 1961, U.S. tanks moved to the border of East Berlin, while General Clay decided to “test” Western access to the east sector that was guaranteed by the Potsdam Agreements of 2 August 1945.<sup>92</sup> Throughout the day, several official American civilian vehicles were escorted on short tours of East Berlin. After initial East German harassment, the vehicles were allowed to proceed unmolested. That evening, unidentified tanks were spotted ... in a bombed-out lot in the Eastern sector of the city. The next morning, a CIA man under diplomatic cover was sent to check out the situation:

He strolled up to one of the groups of parked tanks. When a soldier popped up out of the turret, he asked him in German how to get to Karlshorst. The man stared at him in blank incomprehension. The American asked the same

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<sup>88</sup> CIA Berlin Chronology, 1961; [cia.gov/library](http://cia.gov/library).

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Kempe, *Berlin 1961*, p. 363.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Crankshaw, *Khrushchev Remembers*, p. 459.

question in Russian. He was treated to a friendly grin and a stream of travel instructions.<sup>93</sup>

For the first time in years, an armored Soviet military unit had entered the city limits of East Berlin. The unit was comprised of thirty-three Soviet-manned tanks, accompanied by troops.<sup>94</sup>

The show of strength by Khrushchev and Kennedy in Berlin rapidly escalated. Both sides ended up with ten tanks, with engines running, facing each other at Check Point Charlie. The American tanks with bulldozer blades were conspicuously shown, and American helicopters buzzed over the check point ignoring East German and Soviet protests.<sup>95</sup>

For many years, General Clay's view—that the Russians unleashed the Check Point Charlie confrontation in order to humiliate America—was generally accepted. However, the unearthing of new documentary evidence suggests Clay's view was incorrect and that what had taken place was that Ulbricht's aggressive anti-Western stance had trapped Khrushchev into a situation he did not want to be in. Taylor argues, correctly in my view, that Khrushchev's decision to put Soviet armor in East Berlin was “an attempt to claw back control of the crisis from the East Germans.”<sup>96</sup>

The escalation had, for the first time during the Cold War, produced the dangerous spectacle of American and Russian tanks, facing each other at point blank range, and ready to fire if either side made any untoward move. The stand-off continued through the “chilly” night and lasted for sixteen hours. Moreover, the stand-off in Berlin was a possible point of ignition for a potential Armageddon:

During the Check Point Charlie confrontation, four [U.S.] missile-firing atomic submarines of the Polaris class were submerged in the North Sea, Malinovsky reminded his colleagues—each with sixteen warheads aimed at targets in the Soviet Union.<sup>97</sup>

As the crisis in Berlin approached a hair's breadth from erupting into a violent tank battle, something unseen was also taking place during the dark hours of that night.

At Check Point Charlie the Soviet guard post was communicating, through General Anatoly Gribkov at the Soviet Army High Command, with Khrushchev. At the same time, the U.S. guard post was communicating, through the HQ of the

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<sup>93</sup> Taylor, *The Berlin Wall*, p. 280.

<sup>94</sup> CIA Berlin Chronology, 1961; [cia.gov/library](http://cia.gov/library).

<sup>95</sup> Taylor, *The Berlin Wall*, p. 282.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 282-283.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid*.

US Military Mission in Berlin, with the White House. Frederick Taylor's study of the Berlin Crisis, *The Berlin Wall*, captured a fascinating conversation that took place during the darkness in Berlin:

Clay recalls that when he spoke with Kennedy that evening, the president asked if he was nervous. "Nervous? No, we're not nervous here," Clay answered. "If anybody's nervous, Mr. President, it will probably be people in Washington." That snarky remark failed to annoy the president who had his feet up on his desk during the entire call to Berlin. "Well," he told Clay, "there may be a lot of nervous people around here, but I'm not one of them."<sup>98</sup>

Unknown to Clay at the time was the fact that RFK had contacted his GRU friend Bolshakov as soon as the tank confrontation created the possibility that one wrong move might end up in a war. Within hours, Kennedy and Khrushchev were messaging through RFK and Bolshakov. What exactly was said remains classified, but we know the gist: Kennedy offered to go easy over Berlin in the future in return for the Soviets removing their tanks first.

We also know that the following morning Khrushchev spoke to Marshal Konev in Berlin. According to Khrushchev's memoirs, Konev told him that at Check Point Charlie the barrels of their cannons "remained trained on each other across the border." Khrushchev described what happened then:

I proposed that we turn our tanks around, pull them back from the border, and have them take their places in the side streets. Then we would wait and see what happened next. I assured my comrades that as soon as we pulled back our tanks, the Americans would pull back theirs. ... I said I thought that the Americans would pull back their tanks within twenty minutes after we had removed ours. This was how long it would take for their tank commander to report our move and to get orders from higher up of what to do. Konev ordered our tanks to pull back from the border. He reported that, just as I expected, it did take only twenty minutes for the Americans to respond.<sup>99</sup>

And that choreographed scene was how the Berlin Crisis of 1961 ended.

From the time Khrushchev ordered the erection of the Berlin Wall he knew that "starting a war over Berlin was stupid. There was no reason to do so."<sup>100</sup> The

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid, p. 284.

<sup>99</sup> Crankshaw, *Khrushchev Remembers*, p. 460.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid, p. 458.

establishment of border control in East Germany did not infringe on Western access to West Berlin. Kennedy's 13 August statement about the Wall had been right: "It's not a very nice solution, but a wall is a hell of a lot better than a war."