



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on August 12, 2011

The Berlin Wall, Hiding Shame

A reporter for a West German newspaper asked: “Does the formation of a Free City in your opinion mean that the state boundary will be erected at Brandenburg Gate?” Ulbricht’s answer was strangely revealing:

I understand by your question that there are men in West Germany who wish that we would mobilize the construction workers of the GDR in order to build a wall. I don’t know of any such intention. The construction workers of our country are principally occupied with home building and their strength is completely consumed by this task. No one has the intention of building a wall.



No one at the press conference had mentioned a wall. Why, then, did Ulbricht mention “the intention of building a wall,” something he attributed to a wish on the part of “men in West Germany”? Since Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev had not yet given the go-ahead to Ulbricht’s plans for sealing off the border between East and West Berlin, the East German chancellor may have been trying to force the Kremlin’s hand so that he could stop the hemorrhaging of East Germans to the West.

Contentious From the Start

East Germany’s refugee problem had its roots in the end of World War II, when a defeated Germany was under the administration of the four victorious powers, with the United States, Great Britain, and France occupying their respective sectors in the west and the Soviet Union in charge of the eastern sector, consisting of roughly one-third of the nation. Berlin, the German capital, though located 115 miles inside the Soviet Zone, was also divided into four sectors, with the Soviets occupying the eastern half of the city. But in 1948, Stalin, hoping to drive the Western powers out of the city, established a blockade around Berlin, cutting off all shipments by rail or autobahn. The desperate Berliners, facing starvation, appealed to the West for help. The United States responded with the Berlin airlift, the brainchild of U.S. Army General Lucius Clay and approved by President Truman. An unprecedented continuous shuttle of cargo planes brought food and other vital supplies into the besieged city. The Soviets were unable to do anything to impede, much less stop the rescue mission, short of attempting to shoot down aircraft belonging to what was then the world’s only atomic power. They finally lifted their blockade in May of 1949, after American pilots flew in over two million tons of supplies on 270,000 flights.

The nationalization of industry and collectivized agriculture under the Soviet-dominated government in East Germany resulted in the type of shortages of food, shoes, housing, and other consumer goods common in communist countries. To make matters worse, Moscow had demanded reparations during the first decade after the war and extracted much of East Germany’s resources, including the removal of complete factories. West Germany, meanwhile, had created a comparatively prosperous and free-



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market economy with the considerable help of aid and credit through the Marshall Plan. The result, wrote Frederick Kempe in *Berlin, 1961*, was a highly visible contrast in standards of living:

An East German worker had to work three times as long as a West German to buy a pair of shoes — if he could find them at all. East Germany had 8 cars per 1,000 workers compared with 67 per 1,000 in West Germany.... The result in 1960, when West German per capita income was double that of the East Germans, was a 32 percent increase in refugees, from 140,000 to 185,000, or 500 daily.

Upsetting the Soviet Applecart

By 1961, some 2.5 million Germans had managed to evade travel restrictions imposed by the East German government and make their way into West Germany by road, rail, or air. For many, West Berlin was a way station as they made their way to the Marienfelde refugee camp, where they could find assistance in making their way to new homes and jobs in West Germany. The numbers alone were troubling to the East German government, but the kind of workers who were leaving was even more vexing. Twenty percent of the doctors had left between 1954 and 1961. Engineers, nurses, teachers, and skilled workers in various trades were deserting the German version of the “worker’s paradise.” The labor shortage was keen among unskilled workers as well. As Taylor noted, Ulbricht was desperate enough to ask Khrushchev for Soviet guest workers. Khrushchev was indignant.

“Imagine how a Soviet worker would feel,” he roared. “He won the war and now he has to clean your toilets!”

Khrushchev had been calling for negotiations over the status of West Berlin, which he likened at various times as an ulcer or a bone stuck in his throat. By 1958, he was threatening to sign a treaty with East Germany that would negate Western access to the city. Berlin was the topic that dominated the talks between Khrushchev and Kennedy at the Vienna Summit in June of 1961. The first meeting between the Soviet Party Secretary and the new U.S. President came on the heels of cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin’s ride as the first man in space and Kennedy’s humiliating defeat at the Bay of Pigs in Cuba. Khrushchev was confident Moscow was winning the propaganda war, and he was eager to take the measure of his young adversary.

Khrushchev told Kennedy he wished to negotiate a treaty with him that would alter the status of Berlin. Failing that, he would act alone and revoke all postwar commitments made by the Soviet Union. West Berlin, or “what the West *calls* West Berlin,” would be a “free city” where U.S. troops would have to be removed after six months.

“The USSR will sign a peace treaty and the sovereignty of the GDR (East Germany) will be observed,” he warned. “Any violation of that sovereignty will be regarded by the USSR as an act of open aggression.... If the U.S. should start a war over Berlin, let it be so.” Kennedy, for his part, insisted the United States could not abandon its role in West Berlin.

“West Europe is vital to our security and we supported it in two wars,” he said. “If we were to leave West Berlin, Europe would be abandoned as well. So when we are talking about West Berlin, we are also talking about West Europe.” Kennedy repeatedly put the qualifying word “West” in front of Berlin, as he would again on July 25 when he made an address to the nation on what was by then “the Berlin crisis.” It was a subtle but critical indication of where events were headed. Kempe wrote:

No U.S. President had previously differentiated so clearly between his commitment to all of Berlin and to *West* Berlin. [At Vienna,] it was increasingly clear what Kennedy was saying: Do what you



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want with what is yours, but do not touch what is ours.... But as East Berlin was Soviet territory, he was suggesting that the USSR was free to do what it pleased there.

Meanwhile, the flow of refugees continued to swell through the spring and summer. In May, 17,791 fled through West Berlin. Another 19,198 followed in June and 12,758 in the first two weeks of July. The East German government was frustrated in its attempts to intercept the “deserters” and quite vocal in its contempt for the “flesh traders” who were luring them across the border with offers of better jobs and homes. Some recalled that Ulbricht had temporarily closed the border between the two Berlins in 1953, when Soviet tanks moved in to crush a workers’ uprising. “Entire factories and offices were emptied of their staff as more East Germans left while they still had the chance,” Taylor wrote.

Khrushchev feared that an economic collapse at the western frontier of the Soviet empire could lead to an unraveling of the entire communist bloc. Back in Washington, Kennedy saw the same possibility.

“Khrushchev is losing East Germany,” he told his aide Walt Rostow at the end of July. “If he loses East Germany, then he loses Poland and the rest of Eastern Europe as well. He cannot let that happen. He will have to do something to stop the flow of refugees — perhaps a wall. And we won’t be able to prevent it. I can hold the alliance together to defend West Berlin, but I cannot act to keep East Berlin open.”

Permission to Build

On July 30, Senator William Fulbright (D-Ark.), Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, appeared on ABC’s *Issues and Answers* and suggested the Soviets could stop the hemorrhaging of the East German population by cutting off the refugees’ escape route through Berlin. “Next week if they choose to close their borders they could without violating any treaty,” Fulbright said. “I don’t understand why the East Germans don’t close their border, because I think they have a right to close it.”

Fulbright corrected his statement in the Senate on August 4, acknowledging that freedom of movement across Berlin was guaranteed by postwar agreements. But his earlier statement got far more attention, both at home and abroad. Less than two weeks after it aired on U.S. television, Ulbricht’s forces, with Khrushchev’s blessing, descended upon the city shortly after midnight on August 13. Taylor described the thoroughly planned and well-coordinated operation:

Three thousand one hundred and fifty soldiers of the 8th Motorised Artillery Division, based in Schwerin, rumbled towards the capital. Their 100 battle tanks and 120 armoured personnel carriers would take up position in the leanstock yards at Friedrichsfelde, just outside the centre of East Berlin. Four thousand two hundred more troops of the 1st Motorised Division, in 140 tanks and 200 personnel carriers, left their barracks in Potsdam to cover the outer ring around West Berlin. Both sets of troops were positioned at least a thousand metres back from the sector borders; their task was to prevent any mass attempts to break through into the border area with West Berlin, so that the border police and the construction gangs could carry out the border closure operations undisturbed.

East Berlin’s police were placed on combat alert, and a combined 10,000 men of the Brigade of Readiness (Riot) Police and the Berlin Security Command stopped pedestrian and auto traffic at crossing points. Barricades were put in place, supplemented by tons of barbed wire, purchased from several manufacturers in Great Britain and West Germany. The East Germans, Kempe said, “saw no evidence that Western intelligence agencies had any clue about what was about to transpire. A sales



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order was a sales order. Lenin's prediction came to mind: "The capitalists will sell us the rope with which we will hang them."

All 193 streets that straddled the border were closed. Soldiers with hydraulic drills tore up the boulevard leading to the Brandenburg Gate. City railway lines were shut down, and even entry shafts to sewer lines that connected the East and West were checked regularly for escapees.

Two days later the barricades and barbed wire were supplemented by crushed rubble to form a wall along the border. Buildings that abutted the sector border were sealed off to prevent escape. Residents leaped from upper-story windows toward safety nets held by West Berlin firefighters below. Some landed safely in the nets while others plunged to their deaths.

In Washington, Kennedy expressed relief. The barriers at least meant the Soviets would not be moving tanks and troops into West Berlin. "It's not a very nice solution, but a wall is a hell of a lot better than a war," he said privately.

The following year, a concrete wall was built just east of the original barrier, creating a "no-man's-land" in between, with armed guards in watchtowers with orders to shoot to kill anyone trying to escape.

A Strategy Reworked

The wall was officially dubbed the "Anti-Fascist Protection Rampart" by East German officials, who claimed to be protecting the city from the militarism of their West German neighbors. Better known as the "Wall of Shame," it stood until the fall of 1989 when, after several weeks of civil unrest, the East German government announced that on November 9, all citizens of the German Democratic Republic would be free to visit West Germany and West Berlin. Berliners from both sectors gathered at the wall to celebrate, and with pick axes, hammers, and chisels began to hack away at the visible symbol of the "Iron Curtain" that had descended on the communist-ruled countries at the end of World War II.

Within the next two years, Germany reunified as a free republic, and the Soviet bloc nations left the now-defunct Warsaw Pact in a well-publicized breakup of the old Soviet Union. But the Kremlin and its KGB operatives are still in business. Anotoliy Golitsyn, the highest-ranking KGB official to ever defect to the West, accurately predicted many of the apparent shifts in strategy and tactics of the Kremlin. In his 1984 book *New Lies for Old*, Golitsyn wrote:

"Liberalization" in Eastern Europe would probably involve the return to power in Czechoslovakia of Dubcek and his associates. If it should be extended to East Germany, demolition of the Berlin wall might even be contemplated.... One cannot exclude that at the next party Congress (Yuri) Andropov might be replaced by a younger leader with a more liberal image.

That turned out to be Mikhail Gorbachev, credited in the world press for bringing Perestroika, or an era of openness, to the old Soviet Union. And it was Gorbachev who during his reign referred to the new European Union as "my European Soviet." The old wall and iron curtain are gone, but a socialist "new world order" was, and is, on the rise.

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