

Why did the Soviets provoke a series of crises over Berlin between 1958 and 1961?

Written by Eleanor Kaye

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

Why did the Soviets provoke a series of crises over Berlin between 1958 and 1961?

<https://www.e-ir.info/2011/08/05/why-did-the-soviets-provoke-a-series-of-crises-over-berlin-between-1958-and-1961/>

ELEANOR KAYE, AUG 5 2011

The existence of two separate German states; West Germany, or the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), and East Germany, or the German Democratic Republic (GDR), governed by two opposing ideologies, caused a number of crises in the years prior, and up to the end of the Cold War, not least the East German uprising of 1953, the Berlin blockade and airlift, and the series of crises over Berlin taking place between 1958 and 1961. These would culminate in the construction of a concrete wall through Berlin's centre which came to be one of the most prominent symbols of the Cold War. The motivations for the Soviets in provoking the crises of 1958-1961 can, for the most part, be divided into four categories: defensive, economic, the role of the East German communists and external. Different historians place varying amounts of importance on each group of factors.

Marc Trachtenberg, for example, places the greatest importance on defensive measures. More specifically, he argues in favour of the threat of West Germany gaining nuclear weapons as the main reason due to the security threat this would have on not only East Germany, but the Soviet Union (USSR) as a whole.[1] There was also the fear of the 'subversive' or anti-communist activities of the West in West Berlin as motivation as this also served as a security threat to the communist bloc, as argued by Hope M. Harrison who, whilst arguing for defensive motives, claims the nuclear armament of West Germany as a secondary factor, with 'subversive' activities taking more importance.[2]

Economics and the role of the East German communists can, to an extent, be grouped together when examining why the Soviets provoked a series of crises over Berlin, and particularly the building of the Berlin Wall, as economic concerns drove the East Germans to pressure the Soviets into sanctioning the closing off of the border. The mass migration of East German citizens to the West, via the open border in Berlin, was of great concern to the East German communists as it created a drain on their population, threatening to destabilise their regime. As skilled workers and intelligentsia were leaving the GDR en masse, this created a 'brain drain' on the East German economy.[3]

The East German communists saw the open border as the cause of the GDRs economic problems and historians such as W.R. Smyser and Harrison argue that Ulbricht, the East German leader, used the mass exodus from the East as a means of pressuring the Soviets into agreeing to close the border.[4] This was also a necessary action, and reason why the Soviets provoked this particular crisis, due to the dependency of the GDR economy on the economy of the FRG which threatened to destabilise the communist regime in the GDR, as the West held a degree of power over the GDR economy. It was under pressure from Ulbricht that Khrushchev agreed to build the Wall; a Wall the Soviet Premier did not want building in the first place.

The final group of factors analysed when examining why the Soviets provoked the Berlin crises between 1958 and 1961 is external factors, focusing mainly on the impact of the Sino-Soviet split. The USSR's increasingly difficult relations with communist China at the time played a significant role in the Soviets provoking the crises and their subsequent development, over Berlin. A number of historians such as M.R. Beschloss, Adam Ulam and Patrick Major argue that, for the Soviets, their action over Berlin, and the question regarding the future and organisation of Germany was a matter of prestige in the face of domestic and foreign criticism, mainly from China. The Chinese felt

Why did the Soviets provoke a series of crises over Berlin between 1958 and 1961?

Written by Eleanor Kaye

that Khrushchev was too soft on the West and that a more hard-line approach, similar to that of China was needed over Berlin. Khrushchev was keen to show his Chinese critics that he could take strong action against the West and, therefore, provoked the Berlin crisis to this end. [5] External factors also spread to the influence of the West in effecting the Soviets to provoke the Berlin crisis. The West were reluctant to sign a peace treaty with both Germanys and even refused to recognise the East German regime. As a result, Trachtenberg argues, the Soviets used Berlin as a means of placing pressure on the West, and Harrison argues that the Soviets used Berlin to achieve a peace treaty with the GDR and to secure recognition of the regime in order to stabilise it.[6]

Taking all these factors into consideration, this essay will argue that whilst all factors held significant roles in creating the crisis, defensive measures were the most significant in explaining why the Soviets provoked a series of crises over Berlin between 1958 and 1961, and that pressure from the GDR and external countries were of secondary importance. Fear of the potential of nuclear weapons being stationed in close proximity to a Soviet satellite state, and the use the West was making of West Berlin, caused the Soviets to behave in an aggressive manner over Germany, focussing on Berlin, in order to remove any threat to communism.

The most important motivation for the Soviets in provoking the series of crises over Berlin between 1958 and 1961 was defence. This is a factor that has become increasingly prominent in historians' analysis of the crisis in recent years, with Harrison arguing that, despite the aggressive tactics of Khrushchev during the crisis, his motives were, mostly, defensive in nature.[7] Defensive factors incorporated the Soviet fear of West Germany gaining nuclear arms and the security threats to East Germany and the USSR as a whole posed by the 'subversive' activities being carried out by the West in West Berlin. These activities posed serious threats to the stability of the East German regime, and the power and security of the USSR, leading the Soviets to take a hard-line approach over the German question, using Berlin as a key to bringing about a solution to the problem. The Soviet fears, and subsequent quest for defence, in the crises is summed up by the series of meetings between Ulbricht, Pervukhin and Smirnov: 'These meetings suggest that Soviet and DDR [GDR] motivation for reactivating the German question was primarily defensive, and arose from three main factors: the nuclear rearming of the Bundeswehr; impending Western aggression against East Germany; and the destabilisation of East Germany which was becoming weakened by the outflow of refugees'. [8]

The most analysed aspect of Soviet motivation in the provocation of the crisis of recent years is the Soviet fear of West Germany gaining nuclear weapons. This is examined, for the most part, by historians such as Trachtenberg who, essentially, argues that the Soviets provoked a crisis over Berlin through the fear that West Germany was about to arm itself with nuclear weapons courtesy of the Western powers, and that these fears had a good basis as, by the late 1950s, it became apparent that the FRG was on its way to gaining nuclear weapons under its own control.[9] The Soviets saw the close association between the FRG and the Western powers, through West Germany's inclusion in NATO, as a threat enough on its own and when it became apparent that the West intended to supply the FRG with nuclear weapons, that would be under the sole control of West Germany, the Soviets greatly feared such weapons being so close to one of their satellites. As such, the Soviets decided to take the first strike. As Ulam argues, the greatest fear of the Soviets was West Germany receiving nuclear weapons and this threat had to be removed before the unity of the socialist bloc was shaken or exposed as being less unified than it appeared.[10]

With Germany being viewed as the centre of Europe, and therefore key, the Soviets could not let the West gain any more control over Germany than they already had. The Soviets, therefore, viewed the potential nuclearisation of West Germany as a threat to the Soviet position in Europe, as a nuclear armed Western ally, so close to a communist satellite, gave the West the advantage in Europe, and potential to push back Soviet expansion in the East, and to dictate German reunification. This concerned the Soviets as, should Germany become reunified under the West, the Soviets would be pushed out of Central Europe, and the security of the entire communist bloc would be compromised. As a result the Soviets decided to bring the German question to a head in 1958, by trying to secure a peace treaty with the two German states, gaining de facto recognition of the GDR by the West, and a guarantee from the West that they would not supply the FRG with nuclear weapons. Douglas Selva, however, claims that the main goal of the Soviets concerned the GDR's sovereignty which could be secured by Western recognition of the state. Preventing the FRG gaining nuclear weapons is seen as a secondary factor by Selva.[11] It has also been argued that, 'Khrushchev also favoured atomic-free zones in Central Europe and the Pacific to meet what he perceived as

Why did the Soviets provoke a series of crises over Berlin between 1958 and 1961?

Written by Eleanor Kaye

the growing nuclear threat from the Soviet Union's two potential enemies, the Federal Republic to the West, and China to the East'.^[12] Nowadays, with free access to various archives concerning the Berlin crisis, it is obvious the importance the Soviet fear of West Germany becoming armed with nuclear weapons. This was not so apparent during the crisis, and in the immediate aftermath. It is only *'now'*, it is clear that the main Soviet objective was to secure an agreement that would make it impossible for West Germany to obtain nuclear weapons'.^[13] With hindsight and a greater degree of archival evidence, we therefore see the primary motive for the Soviets in provoking the crises over Berlin. At the time the Soviet actions may have simply appeared aggressive and expansionist, which influenced the development of the crises.

Evidence suggests that the West were carrying out 'subversive' activities in West Berlin. This served to increase Soviet fear of the West as West Berlin, despite being under Western control, fell within the GDR and, as the border in Berlin was open, it was relatively simple for these anti-communist elements to collect information on the East German regime, as well as other communist states. This served as a severe security threat to the USSR, causing the Soviets to trigger a number of crises over Berlin between 1958 and 1961 as a means of removing these 'subversive' elements from West Berlin to secure the GDR and Soviet control in East Germany, and throughout Eastern Europe. This shows that defensive motivations were, again ruling Soviet decisions to provoke these crises. Khrushchev himself states in his memoirs, on the tightening of border control taking place in this period: 'We'd long since decided that free passage in and out of Berlin was nothing more than a loophole for capitalist intelligence services, allowing them to collect information on the location of our troops. The only way to close the loophole was to close the border'^[14]

It has been suggested that West Berlin was supposed to be an 'operational point for organizing so-called resistance movements, preparing the way for a "police action in intra-German conflict" as the first stage for a general "rollback of communism"'.^[15] This would have caused a threat to the existence and security of the USSR and, therefore, for the sake of their strength and survival, the Soviets had to take action to stop West Berlin being used in this way. This also shows how the West perceived the USSR as a threat and acted accordingly, essentially causing a vicious circle. As a result of this use of West Berlin, Adomeit argues that 'the measures of 13 August 1961 were not only of a defensive nature, but also *preventive*, taken to maintain peace in Central Europe',^[16] again showing that the Soviets provoked the Berlin crisis as a first strike, to prevent the Western threat. The Soviet commandant in Berlin saw the danger of the West as demonstrated by his note to the Western commandants stating that: 'It has been pointed out many times that there are based in West Berlin under the cover of the occupation powers more than diversionist, undermining, and spying organizations which are conducting their activities against the G.D.R., U.S.S.R., and other socialist governments'.^[17] The note talks of undesirable elements in West Berlin attempting to undermine the GDR regime showing a fear of the West and a need to 'protect' the GDR from these elements. The same note goes on to mention that West Berlin had been named by West Germany as the 'front line' against the GDR,^[18] showing a concentration of Western action in West Berlin against the East. The Soviets saw this as a threat to the peace.

The Berlin crisis was, arguably, a concentration of the Cold War rivalry, as Germany was seen as being extremely important in tipping the balance of power. As such, ideological rivalry played a role in why the Soviets chose to provoke the Berlin crisis. East Germany was massively important to the USSR and was being used as a 'showcase for socialism'. It was believed that any defeat there 'would be the thin end of the wedge against communism elsewhere'.^[19] The Soviets, therefore, were forced to take a hard-line on the West over Berlin, as the open border, and mass migration of hundreds of thousands of East Germans to the West 'directly undermined Khrushchev's concept of the GDR as a showcase for socialism in the peaceful struggle against capitalism'.^[20] In this 'struggle': 'The principle Soviet tools in the 1958 crisis were vague threats and a flurry of diplomatic activity aimed at dividing the Western camp'.^[21] Despite the constant campaigning for the reunification of Germany, it became increasingly apparent that the Soviets would only accept reunification under their own terms. A note from the USSR to the United States (US) states that: 'Until the reestablishment of the unity of Germany and the creation of a unified German State, West Berlin will be in the position of a demilitarized free city on the basis of its own special statute'.^[22] This refers to the eventual reunification of Germany; however, the free city proposal suggests the Soviets only wanted it under their own terms.

A factor that was more a concern of the East German communists rather than the Soviets, but still had a knock on

Why did the Soviets provoke a series of crises over Berlin between 1958 and 1961?

Written by Eleanor Kaye

effect on the Soviet decision to provoke the crisis over border control and the eventual construction of the Berlin Wall, was economics. Such considerations played an important role in influencing the decisions, and actions, of the Socialist Unity Party (SED) in East Germany, which served to influence a degree of Soviet decision-making over the series of crises provoked over Berlin between 1958 and 1961. Economic factors included the impact of mass migration from East Germany to West Germany, and the dependence of the economy of the GDR on the West German economy, for survival. The Soviet decision to provoke a crisis over border control in Berlin is shown to have been influenced by economic factors as Khrushchev later stated in his memoirs that the introduction of border control relieved the economic problems of the GDR.[23]

The Soviets recognised that West Germany was not only an economic threat to the stability of the GDR, it was also a tempting place to flee to for the disillusioned citizens of East Germany as Khrushchev stated: 'The GDR had to cope with an enemy who was economically very powerful and therefore very appealing to the GDR's own citizens'. Khrushchev goes on to claim that; 'The resulting drain of workers was creating a simply disastrous situation in the GDR, which was already suffering from a shortage of manual labour, not to mention specialised labour'.[24]

This loss threatened to destabilise the East German regime, as people chose to leave their homes rather than live under the communist regime of the GDR. This was subsequently used by the West as a propaganda tool to delegitimise not only the regime of the GDR, but also communist regimes throughout Eastern Europe. So, whilst the mass migration from East Germany to West Germany was not a direct concern of the USSR, it threatened to weaken the Soviet position in Europe vis-à-vis the West. As a result, and through increasing pressure from the SED, the USSR opted to sanction the introduction of border controls in Berlin in an attempt to stem the flow of East German citizens leaving the GDR, and to help stabilise the East German state. This migration was seen by Ulbricht, and the SED, to result from the open border in Berlin which allowed the East Germans to witness for themselves the prosperous living of the West in comparison to that of East Germany. 'Ulbricht blamed the open border for his economic failures and told Khrushchev something had to change'.[25] The Soviets were, originally, against the idea of closing off the border for fear of provoking the West into taking action against the GDR, and the USSR. The Soviets, however, 'finally acquiesced in the summer of 1961 to the claim of East German leader Walter Ulbricht that closing the border was the only sure way to stop the refugee exodus from East Germany to West Germany via West Berlin and to shore up the East German economy and state'.[26]

The migration, en masse, from East Germany to the West, severely threatened the economic stability of the East German state, as it led to a major loss of skilled workers who fled to the West. These workers were needed to build up the strength of the East German economy in order to decrease its dependence on the economy of the FRG. The mass migration led Ulbricht to apply further pressure on the Soviets over closing the border, and Khrushchev finally came to the realisation of the need to close the border for economic reasons to prevent the loss of skilled workers from the GDR. This migration of skilled workers served to disrupt the economy of the GDR as it 'depleted the ranks of important contributors to the national economy'. It also 'slowed down technical progress and the implementation of plans and created difficulties in regular services for the population'.[27] A further point to be made concerning the mass exodus from East Germany is the perception the West had over how the communists would react to this situation as 'At the very end of July the allied Commandants and Ministers had a discussion with Brandt, and all agreed that the communists simply could not afford to let the flow of refugees continue to increase, for reasons not only of prestige but of economics'.[28] This was written by Geoffrey McDermott, British foreign minister in Berlin at the time, showing that the West expected the Soviets to take more aggressive action over Berlin. As a result of this migration; 'Khrushchev wanted some sort of agreement with the Western Powers which would help legitimize the GDR regime in the international arena and thus also help stabilize the situation within the GDR by reducing the number of refugees fleeing the country for West Berlin and West Germany'.[29]

Further to the economical effect of mass migration, the economy of the GDR was both directly and indirectly affected by the economy of the FRG, which served as a reason why the Soviets provoked the crises over Berlin. This interdependence of the economies of the two German states was highlighted by the existence of the Western controlled section of Berlin, within the borders of the GDR. This meant that West Berliners could move easily into the East to purchase East German products affecting consumerism in the GDR. 'Ulbricht was concerned about the West Berliners who came to East Berlin to buy goods and services for much cheaper prices than they had to pay in West

Why did the Soviets provoke a series of crises over Berlin between 1958 and 1961?

Written by Eleanor Kaye

Berlin. This depleted the number of goods and services available for the needier East Berliners and increased their incentive to go West'.^[30] The Soviets, however, were initially reluctant to close off the border in Berlin which was deemed by many to have exacerbated the problem. It was not until November 1960, at a meeting in Moscow, that Khrushchev admitted to not realising how dependent the economy of East Germany had become on West Germany, to Ulbricht. This was following 'Khrushchev and his economic planners' becoming 'struck by how much economy of East Germany had become dependent on the economy of the FRG'.^[31] This shows that, once the Soviets realised the extent of the threat the FRG, and the open border in Berlin posed to the stability of the East German economy, the Soviets moved to a more hard-line policy against the West, therefore provoking a number of crises over Berlin between 1958 and 1961, in a bid to stabilise the GDR economy, and regime, and decrease its dependency on West Germany.

Economic considerations lead directly into the role of the East German communists in causing the Soviets to provoke a series of crises over Berlin between 1958 and 1961. Ulbricht and the SED, who were in charge of East Germany in this period, feared the effect the mass exodus from the GDR was having on their regime and came to the conclusion that the only way to solve the problem was to close off the border running between East and West Berlin, which was being used by the East German citizens to flee to the West. It is also argued that Ulbricht and the East German communists manipulated the situation concerning Berlin in order to gain the outcome they desired from the Soviets in the crisis. For example, 'The SED heightened domestic tensions as the international situation worsened, narrowing the options for the Soviets and leading them to acquiesce to the construction of the Berlin Wall'.^[32]

The role of Walter Ulbricht is taken as the most important aspect when examining the role of the East German communists in causing the Soviets to aggravate the situation in Berlin in the years 1958 to 1961. Ulbricht and the SED favoured a hard-line over the problem with Berlin, and in solving the refugee crisis in East Germany. Preferring not to take such a hard-line, the Soviets tried to convince the East German leadership to become more flexible in their socialist regime in order to 'entice' East Germans into staying in the east rather than fleeing to the west. 'Ulbricht, however, did not want to loosen his grip on power and favoured a more hard-line resolution of the refugee problem exemplified in the building of the Wall'.^[33] This refusal to relax their grip on power and the continuing, and increasing, pressure of Ulbricht led to the building of the Berlin Wall, as Khrushchev only agreed under the pressure of Ulbricht, 'to push for a complete division of Germany and for East Germany's protection from West Berlin influence',^[34] clearly showing that, without the influence of the SED, the crises might not have developed as far, or as rapidly, as they did.

The Berlin Wall was the idea of Ulbricht and the East German communists. The Soviets never wanted a solution to the German problem to be so drastic, and only agreed to the building of the Berlin Wall as a last resort, and under increasing pressure from Ulbricht. Even as the Wall was being built, evidence suggests that Khrushchev was still holding out for an alternative solution, as he requested a barbed wire division be constructed first, in order to see how the West would react to this new development. Whilst the Soviets were happy for at least de facto recognition of the communist regime in East Germany, and Western guarantees that they would not pose a threat to the GDR, the East German communists pushed for 'something more concrete' as a solution to the Berlin problem.^[35] The pressure instilled on the Soviets by Ulbricht is shown to have been influenced by the economic situation of East Germany, and the use of the economic situation as a means of pressure, is highlighted by the fact that, in late June and early July 1961, Ulbricht warned the Soviets that economic collapse of the East German regime was inevitable if the loss of skilled workers was not stopped.^[36] Elisabeth Barker argues that, Khrushchev 'must have been under heavy pressure from the East German Government – struggling vainly with economic difficulties and widespread discontent and powerless to check the flow of refugees to the West – to boost its prestige and authority in some spectacular way'.^[37] As has already been argued, the Wall was not the idea of the Soviets and; 'If not for Ulbricht's insistence, maybe Khrushchev would not have built the Wall at the time he did'.^[38] This, again, shows the importance of Ulbricht in explaining why the Soviets provoked the Berlin Wall crisis in 1961. Harrison argues that the influence of Ulbricht 'grew significantly' up to the construction of the Berlin Wall, that this influence was crucial,^[39] and that 'the tail wagged the dog far more than the West realized'.^[40] Harrison also points out a trend in the actions and influence of the East German communists in precipitating the crisis, as, 'East German influence on Soviet policy actually increased as the stability of the East German regime weakened throughout the Crisis'.^[41] Also, Ulbricht did not just put pressure on the Soviets to solve the GDR's migration and economic problems. According to Harrison, Norman

Why did the Soviets provoke a series of crises over Berlin between 1958 and 1961?

Written by Eleanor Kaye

Gelb argues 'that Ulbricht made the comments about the wall knowing that this would cause panic in the GDR and increased numbers of refugees, which would then compel Khrushchev to finally acquiesce in closing the border and signing a separate peace treaty'.^[42]

In order to fully analyse why the Soviets provoked a series of crises over Berlin between 1958 and 1961, it is important to look beyond Germany and the USSR in themselves, to external factors, to examine how the events and actions concerning foreign countries also affected the origin, and development, of each crisis. External factors, in this case, include the impact of the on-going Sino-Soviet split, and how the actions of the West affected Soviet decision making over Berlin, and Germany in general. Ulam argues that there was a need for the Soviets to score a number of successes in their foreign policy as a reason for the Berlin crisis.^[43] It is also suggested that the series of crises over Berlin were never really about the city itself. Berlin was essentially a 'lever' and was never the real issue as the Soviets were more concerned with the German question as a whole and wanted a peace treaty.^[44]

The developing split between the USSR and communist China ran almost simultaneously to the Berlin crises of 1958 to 1961, and served to influence the Soviets into provoking these crises over Berlin. For Khrushchev, the Berlin crisis was a means of gaining, and maintaining, prestige in the face of criticism from the USSR's domestic and foreign critics, particularly China, with whom the USSR was embroiled in a struggle for power over the communist bloc. With the ongoing competition between capitalism and communism, highlighted in the Cold War, the Chinese leadership felt that the USSR was not being hard enough on the West, particularly over Germany. At the time, China was adopting a much harder-line on the West and, as a result of the Sino-Soviet split, and the subsequent power struggle, Khrushchev was keen to show the Chinese that the USSR was willing, and able, to take more aggressive action against the West than previously appeared.

In the early days of the crisis, 'the growing trouble with China was to precipitate the Khrushchev regime into another crisis with the west'.^[45] The souring relations between the USSR and communist China played a large role in the reasons why the Soviets brought the problem over Berlin to a head between 1958 and 1961 as the Soviets needed to show their strength in their foreign policy actions. In light of the increasing Sino-Soviet split, Khrushchev wanted to prove to the Chinese communist leader that he was not too soft on the West.^[46] This argument is further supported by Mark Landsman who states that Khrushchev could not afford to appear 'too soft in his dealings with the capitalist world' due to the ever increasing rift between the USSR and communist China, and the hard-line stance China were taking against the West.^[47] The series of crises over Berlin, therefore, were shown to be less about Berlin itself, and more about Soviet prestige in the face of foreign criticism. Khrushchev wanted to look strong rather than weak in front of his critics at home and abroad, especially China, and that he was actually putting pressure on the West rather than just appeasing them 'with peaceful coexistence'.^[48] It was, however, not just China whom the Soviets felt the need to impress. By June 1961 the Soviets needed to take a hard-line on Berlin to impress Soviet critics domestically and in the Third World, that the USSR was not soft on Washington and that it could assert its power.^[49]

It is clear that the Berlin crises were never truly about Berlin itself, and that Berlin was being used by Khrushchev as a lever in order to force the West into negotiations over the German problem.^[50] This provides a wider context for the provocation of the Berlin problem from 1958 to 1961, as it can be seen, arguably, to have been an extension of the Cold War rivalry between the US and the USSR. West Berlin actually fell within the borders of the GDR and, as such, Berlin was the greatest weakness of the West. 'Threatening Berlin was therefore a means of exerting pressure on the West as a whole', as West Berlin was in the centre of East Germany, and, therefore; technically still fell under allied control, rather than that of the West.^[51] 'The Soviet leadership decided to put pressure on the western powers where they were most vulnerable, and where the level of tension was easiest for the Russians to control – and that of course meant Berlin'.^[52] as Berlin was seen to be the West's weakest point due to their tenuous claim to having rights to hold some control over the city.

Going back to defensive factors as motivation for provoking the series of crises over Berlin, the Soviets used Berlin as a means of achieving their defensive aims. For example; 'In their note, the Soviets used the Berlin proposal as the anchor of their position and the exclusive subject of the proposed negotiations for a nuclear-free zone to be embodied in a German peace treaty'.^[53] The Soviets wanted a peace treaty as a means of securing the communist bloc and, therefore, used Berlin as a means of pressure with defensive motives behind it. As the decree of the GDR

Why did the Soviets provoke a series of crises over Berlin between 1958 and 1961?

Written by Eleanor Kaye

restricting travel from August 12th 1961 stated; 'This decree on the measures for insuring peace, protecting the German Democratic Republic and its capital of Berlin in particular, and for insuring the security of other Socialist states, remains valid till the conclusion of a German peace treaty',[54] showing that the Soviets would only stop the crises if they felt communism was secure. They felt this would only be through an appropriate peace treaty. Gromyko also felt that 'the best way of all to resolve the Berlin question would be within the framework of a peace treaty with Germany in the event of agreement being reached on such a treaty'.[55] There was also the fact that the demand for German reunification by both East and West was prominent at this time. One of the dominant Soviet demands during the crisis was for a peace treaty which would reunify Germany, therefore the Western refusal to sign a treaty until reunification was, ironically, seen by the Soviets as hampering this.[56]

The fact that the West were making negotiations over Germany difficult is also thought to have led to the Soviets provoking the Berlin crises. Harrison states that 'new archival evidence reveals that Khrushchev's concern about the GDR, combined with his desire to gain prestige by successful negotiations with the West, were the most consistent influences on him during the crisis'.[57] The ambassador at the US embassy in the USSR believed that the 'explanation of general Soviet policy' was 'that Khrushchev has concluded that he cannot achieve his objectives by top level negotiations with present American administration and that he intends to see what effect strong pressure and heightened tension will have on cohesion of Western powers'.[58] This was due to the stubbornness of the West over negotiations, with 'Kennedy's insistence that Khrushchev simply like or lump the existing Berlin situation left the Chairman with few choices other than to ignite a major confrontation'.[59]

It is clear that the reasons for the Soviets provoking a series of crises over Berlin in the years 1958 to 1961 are far from simple, and that there were a number of interacting motivations for provoking each crisis. It is apparent that, whilst each individual set of factors held their own significance in the origins and development of the crises, they held greater significance in the way they interacted together to cause the Soviets to provoke each crisis over Berlin.

Whilst all the above factors, discussed in this essay, were extremely important in analysing why the Soviets provoked a series of crises over Berlin between 1958 and 1961, defensive factors were, arguably, the most consistent and, therefore, most important in motivating the Soviets to provoke the crises over Berlin. Every decision made by the Soviets over Berlin was in response to the perceived threat of the Western powers towards the GDR, the USSR, and other communist countries within Eastern Europe. It was particularly the threat of West Germany gaining nuclear weapons under its own control, as supplied by Western, anti-communist powers such as the US, and the 'subversive' and spy activity taking place in West Berlin against the GDR and the USSR that caused the Soviets to provoke the crises as a means of removing the Western threat.

The importance of defensive factors in the motivation for the Soviets to aggravate the problems in and over Berlin between 1958 and 1961 is demonstrated by Harrison who states that; 'Khrushchev's motivations for starting the Berlin Crisis undoubtedly included the stabilization and strengthening of the GDR, a slowing or stopping of the process of the nuclearisation of the West German Bundeswehr, and a recognition by the Western powers of the Soviet Union as an equal and of the Soviet gains in Eastern Europe during and after World War II as legitimate'.[60] These are all, essentially, defensive measures with the stabilisation, and recognition, of the GDR relieving pressure on the Soviets, and the halting of the nuclearisation of West Germany denying the West any advantage over the USSR making the West less of a threat.

Whilst defensive factors are extremely important in examining why the Soviets provoked a series of crises over Berlin between 1958 and 1961, it is implausible to ignore other factors, as these also played important roles in influencing Soviet decision-making concerning the crises. Other such factors include the role of economics. During this period the GDR had become so dependent on the FRG that there was 'a danger of "conquest without war" by economic strangulation' due to the 'economic leverage' of the FRG over the GDR.[61]

There was also the problem of migration and the West recognised that the sudden increase in migration from East to West in August 1961 was probably due to 'a fear that the escape route might soon be closed'. The migration levels were seen by the West as almost certainly high enough that damage to the economy of the GDR, and its 'prestige abroad' was inevitable.[62]

Why did the Soviets provoke a series of crises over Berlin between 1958 and 1961?

Written by Eleanor Kaye

Influenced almost directly by the economic situation within the GDR was the role of the East German communists in putting pressure on the Soviets to take a much harder line on the West over Berlin and the German problem. This refers most specifically to the pressure the East German leader Walter Ulbricht placed on Khrushchev to close off the border in Berlin and to build the Wall in order to put a stop to the mass migration of East German citizens into the West via this breach in the borders of the GDR.

The final set of factors, and arguably the next most important following those of defence, was the role of external factors in the origins and development of each crisis over Berlin between 1958 and 1961. These incorporate the influence of the Sino-Soviet split and the Soviet response to Western developments over the crises, and in the Cold War rivalry as a whole.

When considering all of the factors discussed throughout this essay, it is arguably apparent that despite the importance of all the factors in the origins of the crises, defensive motivations were the most prominent in causing the Soviets to provoke a series of crises over Berlin in the years 1958 to 1961. The Soviets acted primarily out of a fear that if they lost control of East Berlin and the rest of East Germany to the West then it would threaten their advances in Eastern Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

'Decree of the German Democratic Republic imposing Restrictions on Travel Between East and West Berlin, August 12, 1961', in *Documents on Germany, 1944-1985*, ed. by United States Department of State (Washington DC: US Department of State, Office of the Historian, Bureau of Public Affairs, 1985), pp. 775-776

Hamilton, Keith, Patrick Salmon and Stephen Twigge (eds.), *Documents on British Policy Overseas, Series III, Volume VI* (Oxon: Routledge, 2009)

Khrushchev, Nikita, *Khrushchev Remembers: The Last Testament* (London: Deutsch, 1974)

Khrushchev, Nikita, *Khrushchev Remembers, Volume I* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977)

'Note from the Soviet Union to the United States Regarding the Status of Berlin and the Potsdam Agreements, November 27, 1958', in *Documents on Germany, 1944-1985*, ed. by United States Department of State (Washington DC: US Department of State, Office of the Historian, Bureau of Public Affairs, 1985), pp. 552-559

'Note from the Government of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics to the government of the United States of America, Transmitting a Draft Peace Treaty for Germany, January 10, 1959 (Excerpt)', in *Documents on Berlin 1943-1963*, ed. by Wolfgang Heidelmeyer and Guenter Hindrichs (München: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1963), pp. 242-244

'Note from the Soviet Commandant in Berlin to the Western Commandants Defending the Erection of the "Berlin Wall" (18 August 1961)', in *Documents on Germany, 1944-1985*, ed. by United States Department of State (Washington DC: US Department of State, Office of the Historian, Bureau of Public Affairs, 1985), pp. 779-780

'Statement by Foreign Minister Gromyko on Soviet Proposals regarding Berlin (Geneva 30 May 1959), in *Documents on Germany, 1944-1985*, ed. by United States Department of State (Washington DC: US Department of State, Office of the Historian, Bureau of Public Affairs, 1985), pp. 641-650

'Telegram from the Embassy in the Soviet Union to the Department of State, Moscow, November 11, 1958, 5 p.m.', in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958-1959*, ed. by Charles S. Sampson and Glenn W. LaFantasie (Washington: United States Printing Office, 1993), pp. 47-48

Why did the Soviets provoke a series of crises over Berlin between 1958 and 1961?

Written by Eleanor Kaye

Secondary Sources

Books/book chapters

Adomeit, Hannes, *Soviet Risk-Taking and Crises Behaviour* (Boston: George Allen & Unwin, 1982)

Beschloss, Michael R., *The Crisis Years: Kennedy and Khrushchev, 1960-1963* (New York: Edward Burlingame Books, 1991)

Harrison, Hope Millard, 'The German Democratic Republic, the Soviet Union and the Berlin Wall Crisis', in *The Berlin Wall Crisis: Perspectives on Cold War Alliances*, ed. by John P.S. Gearson and Kori Schake (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 96-124

Harrison, Hope Millard, *Driving the Soviets up the Wall: Soviet-East German Relations, 1953-1961* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005)

Landsman, Mark, *Dictatorship and Demand: the Politics of Consumerism in East Germany* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005)

Major, Patrick, *Behind the Berlin Wall: East Germany and the Frontiers of Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010)

Major, Patrick, 'Going West: the Open Border and the Problem of Republikflucht', in *The Workers' and Peasants' State: Communism and Society in East Germany under Ulbricht 1945-71*, ed. by Patrick Major and Jonathan Osmond (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), pp. 190-208

McDermott, Geoffrey, *Berlin: Success of a Mission?* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1963)

Newman, Kitty, *Macmillan, Khrushchev and the Berlin Crisis, 1958-1960* (New York: Routledge, 2007)

Schake, Kori, 'The Berlin Crises of 1948-49 and 1958-62', in *Securing Peace in Europe, 1945-62*, ed. by Beatrice Heuser and Robert O'Neill (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992), pp. 65-83

Schick, Jack M., *The Berlin Crisis, 1958-1962* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971)

Slusser, Robert M., *The Berlin Crisis of 1961: Soviet-American Relations and the Struggle for Power in the Kremlin, June-November 1961* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1973)

Smyser, W. R., *From Yalta to Berlin: the Cold War Struggle Over Germany* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999)

Trachtenberg, Marc, *History and Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991)

Trachtenberg, Marc, *A Constructed Peace: the Making of the European Settlement, 1945-1963* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999)

Ulam, Adam, *Expansion and Coexistence: The History of Soviet Foreign Policy, 1917-1973* (London: Rinehart and Winston, 1974)

Weitz, Eric D., *Creating German Communism, 1890-1990: From Popular Protests to Socialist State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997)

Journal articles

Why did the Soviets provoke a series of crises over Berlin between 1958 and 1961?

Written by Eleanor Kaye

Barker, Elisabeth, 'The Berlin Crisis: 1958-1962', *International Affairs*, 39.1 (1963), 59-73

Harrison, Hope, M., 'Ulbricht and the Concrete 'Rose': New Archival Evidence on the Dynamics of Soviet-East German Relations and the Berlin Crisis, 1958-61', *Cold War International History Project*, Working Paper no. 5 (1993), 5-140

Harrison, Hope M., 'New Evidence on Khrushchev's 1958 Berlin Ultimatum', *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, 4 (1994), 35-39

Harrison, Hope M., 'The Berlin Wall Crisis and the Khrushchev-Ulbricht Summits in Moscow, 9 and 18 June 1959', *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, 11 (1998), 204-217

Lunak, P., 'Khrushchev and the Berlin Crisis: Soviet Brinkmanship Seen from Inside', *Cold War History*, 3.2 (2003), 53-82

Selva, Douglas, 'Khrushchev's November 1958 Berlin Ultimatum: New Evidence from the Polish Archives', *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, 11 (1998), 200-203

Zubok, Vladislav M., 'Khrushchev and the Berlin Crisis (1958-1962)', *Cold War International History Project*, Working Paper no. 6 (1993), 5-33

[1] Marc Trachtenberg, *History and Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 169-234.

[2] Hope Harrison, *Driving the Soviets up the Wall: Soviet-East German Relations, 1953-1961* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 115.

[3] Harrison (2005), p. 100.

[4] W.R. Smyser, *From Yalta to Berlin: the Cold War Struggle over Germany* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), p. 138, and Hope M. Harrison, 'Ulbricht and the Concrete 'Rose': New Archival Evidence on the Dynamics of Soviet-East German Relations and the Berlin Crisis, 1958-61', *Cold War International History Project*, Working Paper no. 5 (1993), 5-140 (p. 45).

[5] Michael R. Beschloss, *The Crisis Years: Kennedy and Khrushchev, 1960-1963* (New York: Edward Berlingaue Books, 1991), p. 232, and Adam Ulam, *Expansion and Coexistence: The History of Soviet Foreign Policy, 1917-1973* (London: Rinehart and Winston, 1972), p. 619, and Patrick Major, *Behind the Berlin Wall: East Germany and the Frontiers of Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 33.

[6] Trachtenberg (1991), p. 171, and Hope M. Harrison, 'The German Democratic Republic, the Soviet Union and the Berlin Wall Crisis', in *The Berlin Wall Crisis: Perspectives on Cold War Alliances*, ed. by John P.S. Gearson and Kori Schake (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 96-124 (p. 99).

[7] Harrison (2005), p. 114.

Why did the Soviets provoke a series of crises over Berlin between 1958 and 1961?

Written by Eleanor Kaye

[8] Kitty Newman, *Macmillan, Khrushchev and the Berlin Crisis, 1958-1960* (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 29.

[9] Trachtenberg (1991), p. 170.

[10] Ulam, p. 619.

[11] Douglas Selvage, 'Khrushchev's November 1958 Berlin Ultimatum: New Evidence from the Polish Archives', *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, 11 (1998), 200-203 (p. 200).

[12] Newman, p. 167.

[13] Ulam, p. 620.

[14] Nikita Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers, The Last Testament* (London: Deutsch, 1974), p. 505.

[15] Hannes Adomeit, *Soviet Risk-Taking and Crisis Behaviour* (Boston: George Allen & Unwin, 1982), p. 186.

[16] Adomeit, p. 186.

[17] 'Note from the Soviet Commandant in Berlin to the Western Commandants Defending the Erection of the "Berlin Wall" (18 August 1961)', in *Documents on Germany, 1944-1985*, ed. by United States Department of State (Washington DC: US Department of State, Office of the Historian, Bureau of Public Affairs, 1985), pp. 779-780 (p. 779).

[18] Ibid.

[19] Major (2010), p. 33.

[20] Adomeit, p. 199.

[21] Kori Schake, 'The Berlin Crises of 1948-49 and 1958-62', in *Securing Peace in Europe, 1945-1962* ed. by Beatrice Heuser and Robert O'Neill (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992), pp. 65-83 (p. 69).

[22] 'Note from the Government of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics to the Government of the United States of America, Transmitting a Draft Peace Treaty for Germany, January 10, 1959 (Exerpt)', in *Documents on Berlin 1943-1963*, ed. by Wolfgang Heidelmeyer and Guenter Hindrichs (München: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1963), pp. 242-244 (p. 244).

[23] Nikita Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers, Volume I* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p. 486.

Why did the Soviets provoke a series of crises over Berlin between 1958 and 1961?

Written by Eleanor Kaye

[24] Ibid, p. 485.

[25] Smyser, p. 138.

[26] Harrison (2002), p. 97.

[27] Adomeit, p. 185.

[28] Geoffrey McDermott, *Berlin: Success of a Mission?* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1965), p. 29.

[29] Hope M. Harrison, 'The Berlin Wall Crisis and the Khrushchev-Ulbricht Summits in Moscow, 9 and 18 June 1959', *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, 11 (1998), 204-217 (p. 205).

[30] Harrison (2005), p. 100.

[31] Mark Landsman, *Dictatorship and Demand: the Politics of Consumerism in East Germany* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 201, and Vladimir M. Zubok, 'Khrushchev and the Berlin Crisis (1958-1962)', *Cold War International History Project*, Working Paper no. 6 (1993), 5-33 (p. 18).

[32] Eric D. Weitz, *Creating German Communism, 1890-1990: From Popular Protests to Socialist State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), p. 367.

[33] Harrison (2002), p. 97.

[34] Smyser, p. 138.

[35] Patrick Major, 'Going West: the Open Border and the Problem of *Republikflucht*', in *The Workers' and Peasants' State: Communism and Society in East Germany under Ulbricht 1945-71*, ed. by Patrick Major and Jonathan Osmond (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), pp. 190-208 (p. 205).

[36] Ibid.

[37] Elisabeth Barker, 'The Berlin Crisis: 1958-1962', *International Affairs*, 39.1 (1963), 59-73 (p. 60).

[38] P. Lunak, 'Khrushchev and the Berlin Crisis: Soviet Brinkmanship Seen from Inside', *Cold War History*, 3.2 (2003), 53-82 (p. 55).

[39] Harrison (1993), p. 8.

[40] Ibid, p. 8.

Why did the Soviets provoke a series of crises over Berlin between 1958 and 1961?

Written by Eleanor Kaye

[41] Ibid, p. 25.

[42] Ibid, p. 45.

[43] Ulam, p. 619.

[44] Trachtenberg (1991), p. 171.

[45] Ulam, p. 619.

[46] Major (2010), p. 33.

[47] Landsman, p. 199.

[48] Harrison (2002), p. 100.

[49] Beschloss, p. 232.

[50] Newman, p. 167.

[51] Trachtenberg (1991), p. 170.

[52] Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945-1963* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 253.

[53] Jack M. Schick, *The Berlin Crisis, 1958-1962* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), p. 19.

[54] 'Decree of the German Democratic Republic imposing Restrictions on Travel Between East and West Berlin, August 12, 1961', in *Documents on Germany, 1944-1985*, ed. by United States Department of State (Washington DC: US Department of State, Office of the Historian, Bureau of Public Affairs, 1985), pp. 775-776 (p. 776).

[55] 'Statement by Foreign Minister Gromyko on Soviet Proposals regarding Berlin (Geneva 30 May 1959), in *Documents on Germany, 1944-1985*, ed. by United States Department of State (Washington DC: US Department of State, Office of the Historian, Bureau of Public Affairs, 1985), pp. 641-650 (pp. 649-650).

[56] Robert M. Slusser, *The Berlin Crisis of 1961: Soviet-American Relations and the Struggle for Power in the Kremlin, June-November 1961* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1973), p. xi, and 'Note from the Soviet Union to the United States Regarding the Status of Berlin and the Potsdam Agreements, November 27, 1958', in *Documents on Germany, 1944-1985*, ed. by United States Department of State (Washington DC: US Department of State, Office of the Historian, Bureau of Public Affairs, 1985), pp. 552-559 (p. 554).

Why did the Soviets provoke a series of crises over Berlin between 1958 and 1961?

Written by Eleanor Kaye

[57] Harrison (2005), p. 114.

[58] 'Telegram from the Embassy in the Soviet Union to the Department of State, Moscow, November 11, 1958, 5 p.m.', in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958-1959*, ed. by Charles S. Sampson and Glenn W. LaFantasie (Washington: United States Printing Office, 1993), pp. 47-48 (p. 47).

[59] Beschloss, p. 233.

[60] Hope M. Harrison, 'New Evidence on Khrushchev's 1958 Berlin Ultimatum', *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, 4 (1994), 35-39 (p. 36).

[61] Zubok, p. 8.

[62] Keith Hamilton, Patrick Salmon and Stephen Twigge (eds.), *Documents on British Policy Overseas, Series III, Volume VI* (Oxon: Routledge, 2009), p. 87.

Written by: Eleanor Kaye
Written at: University of Leeds
Written for: Dr Matthew Frank
Date written: May, 2011