



At Checkpoint Charlie, US and Soviet tanks faced each other at point-blank range.

Showdown in Berlin

By John T. Correll

In any place was ground zero for the Cold War, it was Berlin.

Awash in intrigue, the former capital of the Third Reich lay 110 miles inside the Iron Curtain but was not part of East Germany. Each of the four victorious powers in Europe in World War II—the United States, Britain, France, and the Soviet Union—held control of a sector of the city, which would be preserved as the future capital of a reunified Germany.

Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev called it “the most dangerous place in the world.” Nowhere else did the superpowers confront each other so closely and constantly. West Berlin was a source of embarrassment and aggravation to the Communist East German regime, which suffered by comparison. Large numbers of East Germans, especially skilled workers, fled to the West through Berlin.

Three times in the decades following World War II, the Soviet Union provoked crisis in Berlin. The third and last of these crises was set in motion June 4, 1961, when Khrushchev gave Western armed forces six months to get out of Berlin. The Russians had made similar demands before, but this time, they held the hard line and the situation escalated rapidly.

The Berlin Wall, constructed by the East Germans beginning Aug. 13 that year, cut off access to West Berlin. For those attempting to escape, the East German border guards had shoot-to-kill orders.

As the crisis escalated, the US Air Force and the Air National Guard reinforced NATO with the largest overseas movement of aircraft since World War II. Before it was over, US and Soviet tanks faced each other at point-blank range at Checkpoint Charlie, raising the fear the superpowers would go to war. Ramifications from the Berlin Crisis of 1961 persisted in Cold War relations for the next 30 years.

The roots of the confrontation went back to September 1944, when Allied occupation protocol divided postwar Germany into three zones, and Berlin into three sectors (Soviet, American, and British). The protocol was amended in July 1945 to provide France a role in the occupation.

The First Crisis

The first Berlin crisis was in 1948, when the Soviets and East Germans attempted to cut the city off from the outside world. However, three air corridors into Berlin, each 20 miles wide, remained open. The Americans and British responded with the Berlin Airlift, which sustained West Berlin with food, fuel, and other supplies from June 1948 to September 1949.

Some senior officials in the US Department of State had favored abandoning Berlin. They opposed the position of Gen. Lucius D. Clay, commander of US forces in Europe and military governor of the US zone in Germany, who was unswerving in his determination to break the blockade. President Harry Truman backed Clay and the airlift succeeded. Clay would return to play a leading role in the 1961 Berlin Crisis, as would another principal

from the 1948 confrontation—Walter Ulbricht, the Communist Party boss in East Germany.

Ulbricht, handpicked for the job by the Soviet Premier, Joseph Stalin, was charmless, intense, and dogmatic, but a good administrator and a reliable enforcer of Soviet hegemony. Stalin had visions of a unified Germany as part of the Soviet sphere of influence, but Ulbricht had so antagonized the populace the Communists had no chance of winning free elections.

The Federal Republic of Germany, consisting of the consolidated Western zones, was established in May 1949 with its capital at Bonn. In anticipation of eventual reunification, West Germany offered citizenship to all Germans, wherever they lived. Ulbricht's regime, the German Democratic Republic, began in October 1949 and claimed East Berlin as its capital, which ignored the

Staff map by Zaur Eylanbekov



Left: US tanks (foreground) and Soviet tanks face off at Checkpoint Charlie in Berlin in October 1961. For 16 tense hours, the world watched as the two superpowers stared one another down. Above: A map of Berlin, divided into four zones by the Allies after World War II, shows how West Berlin was completely surrounded by communist East Germany. Smack in the center is Checkpoint Charlie.



An F-104 from the 151st Fighter-Interceptor Group, McGhee-Tyson AFB, Tenn., is loaded onto a C-124 for transport. The 151st FIS set a record for flying hours per jet fighter in 1962.

city's four-power status. In 1952, East Germany closed and fortified the border with West Germany, although no barriers were erected in Berlin.

Stalin died in 1953 and was succeeded by Khrushchev, who became First Secretary of the Communist Party in 1953 and Premier in 1958. He inherited the Berlin problem—and Ulbricht.

East Germany was the keystone of the USSR's client empire in Europe and could not be allowed to fail. In 1953, Soviet tanks were called in to suppress a revolt by East German workers reacting to harsh living conditions, higher taxes, and increased work quotas.

The Second Crisis

The Berlin problem had not been solved in 1948, only put into remission. From the East German and Soviet perspective, the Allied enclave was a foreign body in their territory. Berlin forced a side-by-side comparison of West German success and East German bumbling. It was also a magnet for emigrants. By 1958, four million East Germans had fled with Berlin as the favorite escape route.

Khrushchev believed the "correlation of forces" was moving in his direction. Soviet power and prestige had grown since 1948. The United States no longer had a monopoly on nuclear weapons and the USSR was first to launch an ICBM and first in space with the Sputnik satellite in 1957.

Ulbricht stepped up his pleas for the "neutralization" of West Berlin, and Khrushchev set off the second Berlin

crisis with a demand on Nov. 27, 1958, that the Western powers renounce their rights in Berlin and "make it possible to create a normal situation in the capital of the German Democratic Republic." If the Allies did not do so within six months, the Soviet Union would transfer to Ulbricht's GDR full control of East Berlin and the access routes to West Berlin. That would end four-power control of the city and force the West to deal directly with Ulbricht.

British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, fearful of the risk of war, wanted to make concessions right away but President Eisenhower would not be stampeded. Negotiations led to a visit by Khrushchev to Eisenhower's presidential retreat at Camp David in Maryland where the two leaders made plans for a summit meeting in Paris the following May to continue the discussion.

Khrushchev withdrew his six-month deadline, but in a drunken New Year's Eve party in Moscow, threatened the US ambassador with nuclear war if his demands, including the withdrawal of Allied troops from

Berlin, were not met. The Paris summit fell apart when the Soviets shot down an American U-2 spyplane over their territory in May 1960 and captured the pilot.

Khrushchev calculated his chances of success on Berlin might improve with the younger, less-experienced John F. Kennedy, who won the presidential election in November 1960.

The third Berlin crisis was about to begin.

Threats at the Summit

The Kennedy Administration took office in January 1961 intent on a new approach. "Truman and Eisenhower believed that Hitler had started World War II because he had thought that his enemies were weak and not ready to act," said Cold War historian W. R. Smyser. "They strengthened and united the West to avoid having Moscow repeat Hitler's mistake. But Kennedy and his advisors looked more closely at the events that had led to World War I. They believed that a sequence of mutually threatening mobilization plans and actions had gotten out of hand and escalated into war in 1914. They thought that US policy should strive to avoid such misunderstandings."

Most of the White House staff and much of the State Department favored a



Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev shakes his fist during a 1960 press conference in Paris. Khrushchev believed his chances of success in Berlin were greater with the election of US President John Kennedy.

Picture Alliance/DPA photo by Otto Noecker

softer line on Berlin. Their counsel was balanced somewhat by Dean Acheson, the flinty former Secretary of State for Truman, brought out of retirement as a special advisor and who was withering in his contempt for the soft liners. In the first six months of 1961 alone, 100,000 East Germans crossed over to the West. Ulbricht complained that West Berlin was “sucking out” the East German workforce.

A summit meeting between Kennedy and Khrushchev was arranged for June 1961, but before then, Khrushchev’s impression of the US President was reinforced by the Bay of Pigs fiasco in April—and Kennedy’s mishandling of it.

At the summit, Khrushchev was in full bombastic form. He renewed his ultimatum and threatened to sign a unilateral treaty ceding Berlin to East Germany and terminating the four-power occupation. He repeated his theme that the US was risking nuclear war for small stakes. “The USSR wants to perform an operation on this sore spot—to eliminate this thorn, this ulcer—without prejudicing the interests of any side,” he said.

Leaving Vienna, Kennedy said Khrushchev “just beat hell out of me,” but was through backing up. In a televised speech July 25, Kennedy declared, “Berlin is not part of East Germany, but a separate territory under the control of the Allied powers,” adding the US “cannot and will not permit the Communists to drive us out of Berlin, either gradually or by force.” He asked Congress for authority to call up the National Guard and Reserves, requested an increase of 217,000 men for the armed forces, and doubled the draft call.

However, the signals were mixed. The speech had 17 mentions of West Berlin, suggesting the United States would not interfere with Soviet actions in East Berlin. On July 30, Sen. William Fulbright, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said, “If [the East Germans] chose to close their borders, they could, without violating any treaty.” In a secret speech to party officials in Moscow Aug. 4, Khrushchev said, “We think that the adversary proved to be less staunch than we had estimated.”

The Berlin Wall

Khrushchev gave Ulbricht tentative approval for his long-standing request to close off West Berlin from the East.

He had already stockpiled enough barbed wire to seal the 27-mile dividing line between sectors and strengthen the 69-mile outer perimeter separating West Berlin from the East German countryside.

Berlin awoke Aug. 13 to find the barricades in place. After waiting for three days to see if the West reacted, Khrushchev allowed Ulbricht to begin building the brick and concrete barrier that would be known as the Berlin Wall.

Kennedy and his advisors were slow to recognize the significance of the wall. Secretary of State Dean Rusk thought no action should be taken and squelched a protest note drafted by the allied missions in Berlin. Kennedy himself said, “A wall is a hell of a lot better than a war.”

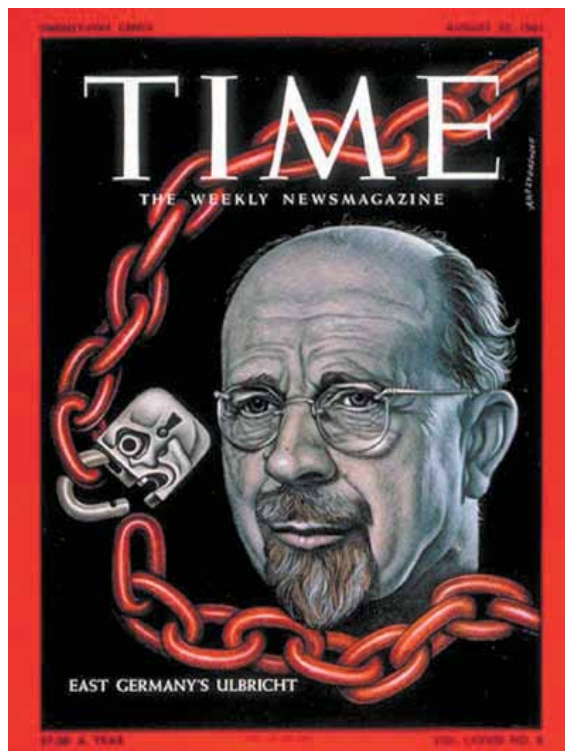
The Allies did not act when Ulbricht’s border police killed persons attempting to escape. Exultant, Ulbricht wrote to Khrushchev Sept. 16 that “the enemy took fewer countermeasures than were to be expected.”

Kennedy realized he had to defend the Allied presence and access to Berlin. Otherwise, demands would just keep coming.

A conventional defense of Berlin was not possible. The main military option short of nuclear weapons was to send reinforcements to Europe as a show of commitment. In August, Kennedy called up 148,000 National Guardsmen and Reservists. The Air Force share of the mobilization was the equivalent of 36 fighter, reconnaissance, and airlift units, mostly from the ANG.

The first deployment was a Composite Air Strike Force from Tactical Air Command, primarily F-100 fighters from the active duty force, in Operation Tack Hammer in September. Additional active duty and Guard fighters followed in Operation Stair Step in November and December. Bases in Germany, France, and Spain made room for hundreds of airplanes. Many of them were from the 22 ANG squadrons which deployed to Europe within 30 days of mobilization.

It would be revealed years later that in September and October 1961, Ken-



The Aug. 25, 1961, cover of Time magazine featured Walter Ulbricht, who antagonized his own people—and the West.

nedy considered a plan, drafted by an assistant to National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy, for a nuclear first strike to preemptively destroy the Soviet nuclear strike capability. At that time, the Soviets had no more than eight ICBMs and their bombers were parked in the open. Nothing came of the plan.

Khrushchev had gained much of what he wanted. The internal border through the city was closed without serious repercussions. However, Ulbricht was not satisfied so long as Berlin was under four-power occupation and kept jacking up the tension, including harassment of traffic on the autobahn and impeding of diplomatic vehicles.

Clay Again

Meanwhile, Clay, the hero of the Berlin Airlift, arrived in Berlin as Kennedy’s personal representative. Kennedy had called him out of retirement for political reasons, hoping to neutralize criticism from conservatives and hardliners. Germans lined the streets to welcome Clay, but the State Department and US military officials in Europe were less enthusiastic—thinking Clay was a loose cannon.

Clay was certain Khrushchev was bluffing, no more willing to fight a war over Berlin than the United States was. Khrushchev’s tactic was to have East Germans take all of the provocative



actions and force the Americans—who did not recognize the GDR—to deal with Ulbricht. The Soviets claimed they had no responsibility for the situation in Berlin. Clay wanted to smoke them out. His charter was to “report, recommend, and advise,” but he would not let that hold him back.

Clay had the US Army build a mock-up of a section of the wall in a wooded area of Berlin and practice demolishing it. Higher headquarters in Heidelberg ordered the exercise stopped, but the Soviets had seen it already, which was what Clay had intended.

The main drama unfolded at Checkpoint Charlie on the Friedrichstrasse, the dividing line between American and Soviet sectors and the only designated border crossing point through the wall for the western military. In violation of the postwar agreement stipulating free passage for occupation authorities between sectors, Ulbricht had his border guards stop Allied vehicles and demand ID. The British, on orders from Macmillan, complied. The Soviets had not authorized Ulbricht to stop Allied vehicles but they had little choice except to back him up after he had done it.

On Oct. 22, Allan Lightner, chief of the US mission in Berlin—in cooperation with Clay—pulled up at

Checkpoint Charlie and refused to show the East Germans his papers. They would not let him pass. Clay sent nine US military policemen with rifles to escort Lightner’s car through the checkpoint.

Kennedy’s advisors recoiled and urged the President to clamp down on Clay, but Kennedy had another problem. Clay proposed to resign unless he had freedom to maneuver and Kennedy could not afford politically to have Clay quit.

Tank to Tank

Ulbricht upped the ante again. No foreigners could pass the checkpoint without ID unless they were in Allied military uniforms. On Oct. 26, the guards stopped a car with US official plates. Clay sent five jeeps of armed troops to escort the vehicle into East Berlin and back. He also had 10 M-48 tanks, some of them with bulldozer blades, brought up close to Checkpoint Charlie. The next day, Soviet tanks, the first seen in Berlin since the 1953 uprising, rolled into position on the other side of the border.

The confrontation lasted for 16 hours—from 5 p.m. on Oct. 27 to 11



Top: Berlin’s historic Brandenburg Gate was carefully kept on the East Berlin side of the Berlin Wall. Above: President Kennedy addresses the massive crowd gathered in West Berlin in June 1963 for his “Ich bin ein Berliner” speech.

White House photo via the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library

a.m. on Oct. 28—with the tanks some 100 yards apart, guns trained on each other. Around midnight (6 p.m. in Washington) Kennedy talked to Clay on a secure line. Overriding the objections of his advisors, Kennedy told Clay, “Don’t lose your nerve.”

Kennedy’s show of strength was diminished somewhat by the later revelation that his brother, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, had struck a backchannel deal with the Soviets that both sides would withdraw their tanks the next day. At 10:30 a.m., the Soviet tanks began leaving and half an hour later, the US tanks departed as well.

Macmillan rushed to assure the Soviets that Clay would be removed, but that did not happen. Rusk belittled “the silly tank confrontation at Checkpoint Charlie brought on by the macho inclinations of General Clay,” but Clay had exposed the Soviet charade in Berlin.

The confrontation “destroyed the image of the GDR as a sovereign force,” said historian Smyser. “Having seen what Ulbricht would do on his own, Khrushchev subsequently kept him under stricter control. ... Clay regarded the confrontation as a success because it showed that the Allies would not desert West Berlin.”

The Berlin crisis persisted for a while longer. Khrushchev figured he got the better of the exchange and at the end of 1961, told a group of Soviet officials that “Kennedy doesn’t have a strong background, nor generally speaking, does he have the courage to stand up to a serious challenge.” Harassment continued, and the Soviets occasionally buzzed Allied airplanes in the air corridors. US Air Force reinforcements remained in Europe through the next summer.

Frederick Kempe, president of the Atlantic Council, believes the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962 was an aftershock of Berlin and that “Khrushchev would not have risked putting nuclear weapons into Cuba at all if he had not concluded from Berlin in 1961 that Kennedy was weak and indecisive.” But by the Cuban crisis, Kennedy had learned his lesson about showing irresolution. Khrushchev blinked first.

In June 1963, Kennedy went to Berlin, walked along the wall, and delivered his historic “Ich bin ein Berliner” speech to a cheering throng of 300,000. Clay was there with him.

“I am proud to come here in the company of my fellow American, General Clay, who has been in this city during its great moments of crisis

The Modular Deployment

Among those whose lives were disrupted by the Berlin Crisis of 1961 were the Air Guardsmen of the 151st Fighter-Interceptor Squadron at McGhee-Tyson Air Force Base in Knoxville, Tenn. Alerted in August for possible recall to active duty, members wound up their private affairs and prepared to go, but for a while, activation looked unlikely. Then orders came on Oct. 9 to report for deployment Nov. 1.

For the past year, the squadron—which was part of the 134th Fighter-Interceptor Group—had flown the stubby-winged F-104A Starfighter, called “the Zipper” for its blazing Mach 2 speed. The active duty force had F-104Cs and had passed the F-104A, which had been operational only since 1958, to selected Guard units.

The commander, Maj. Robert W. Aiken, led an augmented squadron with the group’s 18 F-104A fighters, its two F-104B two-seat proficiency trainers, and about half of the unit’s personnel in the deployment to Ramstein AB, West Germany. Most of the others activated went elsewhere, including to bases in France to fill in understrength Guard units.

The F-104A did not deploy for long distances in the conventional manner. It needed frequent fueling because of its short operating range, and unlike the F-104C, it could not be fitted with a refueling probe to gas up from a KB-50 tanker. The standard procedure was to take the airplane apart and airlift it to the new location.

Fortunately, the F-104 was easy to disassemble. The entire tail assembly, including the aft fuselage behind the wing, came off as a unit to allow removal of the engine. The forward fuselage was winched aboard a C-124 through the big cargo door in front and stowed according to the predetermined loading plan, surrounded by the tail, wings, and nose.

By Nov. 20, the squadron was at Ramstein, ready to operate. Performance was excellent from the beginning, as the veteran Guardsmen were highly qualified. Charles F. Brakebill, on the deployment as executive officer, remembers that one of the squadron’s pay clerks was a certified public accountant back home in Knoxville.

In May 1962, the squadron set a record, both for US Air Forces in Europe and for the Air Force as a whole, for the highest flying time per jet fighter aircraft assigned for any one month. The average of 46 hours, 27 minutes was built by 17 fighters flying the entire month with the 18th aircraft joining in on the last day.

As the deployment rolled on, dozens of the airmen and all except eight of the officers brought their families to Ramstein. Since their dependents were not officially sponsored, they lived on the local economy and the Guardsmen did not receive quarters or subsistence allowances to help with the expense. There was no problem, though, in enrolling their children in the US Army schools at Ramstein and Vogelweh elementary schools.

The 151st FIS returned to McGhee Tyson in July 1962 and was released from active duty Aug. 15.

and will come again if ever needed,” Kennedy said.

Construction and strengthening of the wall continued with the addition of a “death strip” and 116 watchtowers. The “fourth generation wall” completed around 1980 was built of separate sections of reinforced concrete, each 12 feet high and four feet wide. Several of these sections reside at the National Museum of the US Air Force at Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio, where they have been on display since January 2000.

Between 1961 and 1989, at least 136

East Germans died trying to escape over the Berlin Wall. Still more were killed attempting to cross the inner-German border elsewhere. Even in those grim times, the wall was a major tourist attraction for visitors to West Berlin until it was torn down in 1989.

With the passage of time, fewer people remember the Berlin Crisis of 1961 and the Berlin Wall is a fading memory. In 2010, McDonald’s opened a 120-seat fast food restaurant at the intersection where Checkpoint Charlie once stood.

Tourists call it “Snackpoint Charlie.” ■

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