CHAPTER NINE

The Berlin Crises of 1958–59 and 1961

ROBERT M. SLUSSER

IN THE PERIOD from November 1958 to October 1961 the divided city of Berlin served as the focal point of a continuing international conflict that pitted the USSR and its allies against the Western alliance of the United Kingdom, France, and the United States. Chronologically, the action centering on Berlin falls into two distinct segments: (1) the Berlin crisis of 1958–59, which opened on November 27, 1958, with a Soviet note calling for withdrawal of the Western occupation forces from West Berlin and its conversion into a "free city" under a new agreement to be negotiated by the Western powers with a six-month deadline; this crisis reached its muted and inconclusive end ten months later when Soviet Premier Nikita S. Khrushchev joined President Dwight D. Eisenhower in an agreement to hold negotiations on the Berlin question without the pressure of a Soviet-imposed deadline; and (2) the Berlin crisis of 1961, which began in February of that year with a Soviet note to the Federal Republic of Germany; escalated sharply in June, when the USSR announced another six-month deadline, this time for the conclusion of peace treaties with the East and West German states; reached a climax on August 12 when the USSR and its East German allies established a physical barrier, the Berlin Wall, between the Soviet-occupied sector of East Berlin and the three Western-occupied sectors of the city; and finally receded after a tank confrontation between the United States and the USSR along the sector boundary in the divided city in October.

Between the two Berlin crises there intervened a period during which

significant changes took place in the relative strength and internal power relationships of the USSR and the United States and their respective allies. The second Berlin crisis was therefore by no means a mere replay of the first. The 1961 crisis took up the conflict in a new international context, with differing strategies on either side, and with a different conclusion. The two crises, nevertheless, can usefully be regarded as "all a single tapestry,"[1] or, in a longer perspective, as phases in a single extended struggle for world supremacy between the USSR and the United States.

Historical Background

Berlin became the focal point of the Soviet-Western struggle as the result of a series of decisions, agreements, and actions taken during and shortly after the Second World War.[2] The European Advisory Commission decided at a meeting in September 1944 to divide a defeated Germany into three zones of occupation, to be administered by the three principal allies, the United States, the United Kingdom, and the USSR. At the same time the commission agreed that the German capital, Berlin, should be administered jointly by the three powers, each occupying a sector of the city. Despite the fact that Berlin lies some 110 miles east of the border separating the Soviet zone of occupation from those of the Western allies, no provision was made at that time to guarantee Western rights of access to the city.

At the Yalta Conference in February 1945 the three powers agreed to invite France to share in the occupation of postwar Germany and Berlin. When the war in Europe ended, therefore, Germany was divided into four zones of occupation, and Berlin into four occupation sectors. It was agreed that the nation and its capital should be administered as undivided en-

1. Alexander L. George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice* (Columbia University Press, 1974), p. 395.

2. The historical background of the Berlin crises is covered in Jean Edward Smith, *The Defense of Berlin* (Johns Hopkins Press, 1963), pp. 1–130, and, more briefly, in Jack M. Schick, *The Berlin Crisis, 1958–1962* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), pp. ix–xvi. For a useful documentary survey, see Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *Documents on Germany, 1944–1970*, 92:1 (GPO, 1971). The evidence on the division of Germany is analyzed in two recent books: Tony Sharp, *The Wartime Alliance and the Division of Germany* (Oxford University Press, 1975), and John H. Backer, *The Decision to Divide Germany: American Foreign Policy in Transition* (Duke University Press, 1978).

in the July 25 speech was the list of additional military measures Kennedy said he would ask Congress to authorize, as follows:

1. An additional $3.247 billion for the armed forces.
2. An increase in the army's total authorized strength from 875,000 to approximately 1 million men.
3. Increases in the active duty strength of the Navy by 29,000 and of the Air Force by 63,000.
4. A doubling and tripling of draft calls in coming months, the extension of terms of duty of some military officers on active service, and the call-up of certain reserve units, including Army National Guard divisions, Air Force Reserve air transport squadrons, and Air National Guard tactical squadrons.
5. Retention or reactivation of ships and planes previously headed for retirement, together with deactivation of B-47 bombers.
6. The procurement of nonnuclear weapons, ammunition, and equipment.

Kennedy also called for an additional $207 million in civil defense appropriations, bringing his total new defense budget requests to $3.454 billion. This brought to more than $6 billion the increases he had requested since January, with a resulting projected deficit of over $5 billion. Appropriately, part of the July 25 speech was concerned with an analysis of the nation's economic health, which Kennedy asserted was strong enough to sustain the effort he called for.

Kennedy's July 25 speech and the measures it set in motion mark the real turning point in the Berlin crisis of 1961. The program it outlined constituted both a reasoned response to the Soviet challenge and a massive counterchallenge, which had behind it the entire weight of the U.S. economy, now well on its way to recovery from the stagnation that had marked the final years of the Eisenhower administration.

Reports of Kennedy's July 25 speech reached Khrushchev two days later at Sochi, where he was vacationing. An American, John McCloy, Kennedy's special representative for Soviet-U.S. disarmament talks, was present and able to observe and report Khrushchev's reaction.[245] Stripped of its emotional rhetoric, it boiled down to an admission that the USSR would not attempt to meet the massive U.S. challenge. Khrushchev gave McCloy no hint of any decision to seal off West Berlin, but he did reveal

245. Slusser, *Berlin Crisis of 1961*, pp. 88–93.