The Berlin Crisis of 1961

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Introduction

For a long time historians have been loath to study the recent past, citing inadequate perspective or the alleged lack of documentation as reasons to justify their reluctance. When it comes to the recent history of the Soviet Union, their reluctance has been greatly strengthened by the obstacles which the Soviet regime puts in the path of historical research.

A sound understanding of recent Soviet history is, nevertheless, a vital necessity for mankind, and the task of studying it must be undertaken, notwithstanding the difficulties which it entails. Fortunately, the systematic investigation of recent Soviet history is not impossible. Documentation of various kinds exists in abundance, to an extent which would probably surprise people who have not looked into the matter. In particular, there is a veritable wealth of material available on Soviet internal and foreign policy during the years of Khrushchev's dominance (1957–64).

Three factors have contributed to this favorable situation: first, the ideological conflict between the Soviet Union and Communist China, which generated a vigorous and often revealing polemical literature on both sides; second, the continuing struggle for power in the Communist party of the Soviet Union, which produced much valuable documentary evidence, though often of an oblique kind; and third, the personality and policies of Khrushchev himself—ebullient, loquacious, impulsive, and at times calculatedly indiscreet—which in a number of ways helped greatly to ease the historian's task.

For the study of Soviet–American relations in the Khrushchev period, the situation is also unusually favorable. One of the consequences of the assassination of President Kennedy was the early publication of a number of historically valuable memoirs by participants in his administration, as well as books by observers and critics. The internal debate in the United States over
the Vietnam war has produced a flood of studies and documentary compilations on the period, of a kind historians seldom have access to so soon after the event. Thus materials have become available which make it possible to study the American side of the Soviet–U.S. relationship in far greater depth than would ordinarily be true for events of the recent past, and evidence from the American side often casts a revealing light on Soviet actions and policies.

The result of all these factors, and others contributing toward the same end, is that the study of recent Soviet history and of Soviet–U.S. relations in the Khrushchev–Kennedy era is a task which the historian may undertake with a well-founded hope of achieving worthwhile results. It goes almost without saying, of course, that the task is beset by formidable difficulties of interpretation and analysis, that there are many points on which documentary evidence is not available, that there are some important questions which must remain unanswered, and that the conclusions reached must sometimes be stated in provisional form. But to a greater or lesser degree, the same things could be said of work in any other historical period. Here, as elsewhere, the historian's basic problem is to devise suitable methods for making the available sources yield their fullest significance.

In the present study I have tried to work in accordance with three basic principles: first, observance of strict chronological order and careful dating in the succession of events and their interrelation; second, attention to the close and continuous interaction between Soviet internal and foreign policy; and third, recognition of the wide-ranging scope of recent Soviet history, regarding which no a priori exclusions of possibly relevant areas of concern can safely be made.

The present study deals with an episode—probably the major episode—in Soviet–U.S. relations, and in Soviet (and U.S.) foreign policy in general, during the first year of the Kennedy administration. History, however, is a continuous never-ending stream of interrelated events and processes, and it is impossible to achieve an adequate understanding of any given episode in isolation from its larger historical context, no matter how intensively one may scrutinize the evidence. I have already published an essay dealing with Soviet foreign policy during the entire Khrushchev period (1957–64), which constitutes a kind of pilot project for the series of linked studies of which the present volume has been conceived as an integral part.1 The conclusions I reached in that essay have been in part confirmed, in part modified, and in part enriched by entirely new insights as the result of the more detailed research which underlies the present volume. In particular, my concept of the Soviet policy-making process in the Khrushchev period and of Khrushchev's position vis-à-vis his colleagues in the collective leadership has been radically altered

as a result of the almost microscopic enlargement of the field of study which followed my decision to devote an entire volume to the brief six-month period of the Berlin crisis of 1961.

The dominant view among Western scholars who investigated the problem of Soviet policy-formation in the period before Khrushchev's overthrow in October 1964 was that Khrushchev wielded the same kind of unlimited power as, in their time (in the view of these same scholars), did his predecessors Stalin and Lenin. A challenge to this view was offered by a minority of scholars who held that Khrushchev, powerful though he might be, was nevertheless forced to take into account the views and wishes of others in the Soviet leadership group. Some of the minority scholars tended to view this process as one of interaction on the personal level, others thought of it in terms of socio-economic interest groups in the Soviet population, with which individual Soviet leaders tended to identify themselves and for which they served as spokesmen.

My own preference lay with the minority, but even their explanation seemed to me to require further analysis. It was partly to achieve a more satisfactory understanding of the problem that I embarked on the research project of which the present volume forms a part. What emerged from the study surprised even me: it was the discovery that neither of the two opposing schools of interpretation of recent Soviet political history had found a completely satisfactory answer to the problem of policy-formation, though both had grasped part of the complex reality. What I found was evidence of a power struggle more intense, more violent, and more divisive than had previously been suspected, a situation in which power lay at times in the hands of a single leader, at times was shared by a collective leadership, and at times seemed to be up for grabs, with whoever could grasp the levers of power entitled to operate them.

Once I had recognized the significance of the evidence pointing to this unorthodox conclusion, confirmatory details turned up in the most varied contexts. The real test of the hypothesis, I realized, would be the record of the Twenty-second Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in October 1961. It was only after I had subjected the protocols of the congress to a detailed day-by-day, session-by-session, speech-by-speech analysis, integrated with the simultaneous events taking place in Berlin, Washington, Peking, and elsewhere, that I felt confident that the hypothesis I had formulated would stand the test of any desired degree of factual verification. The evidence, to

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Introduction

a surprising extent, was there, once one approached the congress as an event unfolding in time and space rather than as a kind of Platonic abstraction related solely to its own genre, that of Communist party congresses.

The analysis of recent Soviet history presented in this book thus differs in some important respects from any previously offered. It is based on a detailed matrix of factual evidence organized on chronological principles, but at certain key points it substitutes analysis and inference for concrete documentary evidence. To that extent its conclusions must be regarded as hypotheses, subject to modification as additional sources become available. But I am convinced that it is essentially correct, and I therefore feel justified in presenting it as a contribution to historical understanding and as the basis for further investigation. Of any alternative explanation of the facts I would ask only that it demonstrate a comparable capacity to organize and explain the detailed evidence which is now available.

A valuable by-product of the conclusions reached on the basis of an intensive analysis of Soviet foreign policy in the Khrushchev–Kennedy period is that they put in a new and more revealing light the foreign policy of the Kennedy administration. Several attempts have recently been made to depict John F. Kennedy as a dogmatic anti-Communist, a Cold War-monger whose actions helped create the very crises with which his administration tried to cope. It is not necessary to make an extensive analysis of Soviet foreign policy in order to refute oversimplified and inaccurate analyses of this kind; the evidence of Kennedy's patient search for a basis for negotiations with the Soviets over Berlin during the 1961 crisis is part of the historical record, and it is only by ignoring the plain facts that the authors in question have managed to construct their image of Kennedy as a Cold Warrior.

What emerges from intensive study of the Soviet side in the Berlin crisis of 1961, however, is the recognition that the Soviet threat to vital U.S. interests was in actuality even more direct and dangerous than anyone in Washington at the time realized. The prevailing view in the Kennedy administration, reflecting and based on the consensus of American scholars, was that Khrushchev dominated the process of Soviet foreign policy formation and that he was, in the final analysis, a rational and responsible statesman who might flirt with brink-of-war policies but who could always be relied on to draw back well short of the brink itself.

By contrast, the picture of the Soviet leadership which emerges from the present work is that of a group so badly split by nearly unbridgeable differences over fundamental policy questions that at times it was subject to no

single unifying force. It is the picture of a process of foreign policy formation in which an opposition faction could play Russian roulette with the peace of the world by taking actions which deliberately risked nuclear war, and in which a struggle for internal political power was successfully masked from the outside world, only to erupt in disguised form as a major schism in the international Communist movement.

The Soviet-Western conflict over Berlin in 1961 has a long history of its own. Its origins date back to World War II and the arrangements drawn up at that time by the principal nations of the Grand Alliance—Britain, France, the Soviet Union, and the United States—for the postwar administration of defeated Germany and its capital, Berlin. Under four-power agreements reached in 1944 and 1945 Germany was divided into four zones of administration, each to be administered by one of the four Allied powers. Berlin was also placed under four-power control, despite the fact that it was entirely surrounded by territory assigned to the Soviet Zone of Administration and lay some 110 miles east of the zones administered by the Western Allies.

Since the Soviet Union and its wartime partners frequently differed in the postwar years, sometimes sharply, over policy to be pursued in Germany and Berlin, it is not surprising that this complex and cumbersome administrative structure has provided frequent opportunities for Soviet-Western conflict. It is not necessary to summarize here the principal stages in that conflict. Suffice it to say that when the Soviets and the Western powers clashed over Berlin in 1961, they were replaying a long-familiar scenario. In particular, the Soviet demand for the conclusion of a peace treaty with Germany, which was to form a dominant theme in the Berlin crisis of 1961, had previously been raised in the most insistent way by Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev in November 1958. At that time Khrushchev demanded that a German peace treaty be signed within six months, though when the deadline actually came, in May 1959, he let it pass without protest.

Obviously, this earlier “Berlin crisis” constitutes part of the immediate historical background of the subject of the present study, since everyone concerned in the crisis of 1961 was vividly aware that Khrushchev had recently tried the same gambit and had failed to achieve his objective.

It is relatively easy to sketch the general background of the Berlin crisis of 1961 in international events and to provide references to works dealing with

the subject in its broader aspects. It is a more difficult problem, however, to provide background concerning the recent internal history of the Soviet regime. Fortunately, a number of excellent analyses bearing on various aspects of the subject have recently appeared. These and similar studies will help the reader gain an understanding of the general character of Soviet politics in the Khrushchev era.

One vitally important episode which helped set the stage for Soviet policy during the Berlin crisis of 1961 was a meeting of the Communist Party Presidium (the party’s ruling policy-making body) which I believe took place in mid-February 1961, just six months before the onset of the major phase of the Berlin crisis. This meeting, and the decisions it reached, are the subject of an essay I recently published. I have summarized the findings of the article in the present study where they bear on its immediate subject, however, and in general have tried to make the book as self-contained as possible, even while recognizing the unending flow of historical change and development.

Und somit fangen wir an.

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6 See especially the works of Michel Tatu, Carl Linden, Sidney I. Ploss, and Robert Conquest mentioned in the List of Works Cited.