The Defense of Berlin

(Setting the Scene)

During the second week of August, 1961, an atmosphere of expectancy hung over Berlin. The flight of refugees from the Soviet zone, increasing steadily since the Vienna Conference between President Kennedy and Premier Khrushchev, was now at record proportions.

During June and July, more than fifty thousand persons had come over to the West. Another sixteen thousand arrived during the first eleven days of August. On Saturday, August 12, 1961, a new twenty-four hour record was set when over three thousand disenchanted East Germans made their way to the reception center in West Berlin to ask for asylum. Only in the summer of 1953, the summer of the violent uprising in East Germany, had more people fled the Socialist Utopia of Walter Ulbricht.

As in 1953, reports of unrest throughout the Soviet zone were rife. Even the heavily censored East German press made little effort to conceal the rising tide of popular discontent. From Halle, the Communist newspaper Freiheit reported that people in East Germany were clamoring for reunification before a separate peace treaty with the Soviet Union. In Leipzig, workers publicly demanded an end to the Iron Cur-
tain between East and West. In East Berlin, the same construction workers who had touched off the revolt on Stalin Allee on June 17, 1953, warned Khrushchev against trying to settle the German question unilaterally.  

Each of the refugees now coming to West Berlin also brought stories of unrest in the Communist zone. Many even reported an imminent East German move to seal the frontier. These reports, as it happened, were not without foundation. In the past twelve years over two and a half million people had left the Communist zone of East Germany; since 1945, more than four million. The population of the so-called "German Democratic Republic," almost eighteen million in 1949, numbered little more than sixteen million by mid-1961.  

The drain of labor and skilled workers represented by this extraordinary emigration was more than the East German regime could endure. Most of those who were leaving had been usefully employed. Over half were under twenty-five years old and represented a particularly serious loss in terms of future productivity. Of the others, many were senior craftsmen, highly trained artisans, physicians, teachers, and engineers. All were desperately needed in the sagging economy of Walter Ulbricht and could not easily be replaced.

Perhaps as important as its effect on the East zone's economy was the effect of the great exodus on world opinion. The shortcomings of communism, as practiced in the "German Democratic Republic," were being exposed daily by the thousands who were rejecting it for the freedom of the West. As a result, the Communist crusade among the neutral and uncommitted nations was being seriously undermined.

The role of Berlin in promoting the refugees' escape was well known. At no other point was the Iron Curtain so easily breached. A would-be refugee from the Soviet zone had only to catch a train to East Berlin, transfer to an intracity subway (U-Bahn) or elevated (S-Bahn), and

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* Among the 30,415 persons who fled from East Germany during July, 1961, there were: 65 physicians, 29 dentists, 6 veterinarians, 12 pharmacists, 332 teachers, two university professors, six lawyers, two judges, 455 engineers and 186 university students.

By source of employment, the total was broken down as follows: industry and handicrafts, 21.8%; trade and transport, 11.4%; domestic and health service workers, 4.2%; farmers, 4.1%; administrative employees, 3.1%; engineers and technicians, 2.8%; artists, intellectuals and university students, 2.5%; other occupations, 9.7%; housewives, 10%; children, 24.5%; pensioners, 5.9%; (New York Times, August 13, 1961.)
then ride freely into the Western sectors. If he wanted, he could even walk across or take a taxi. Border controls between the sectors were rigid but free movement was one of the attributes of Berlin's four-power status. Once in the Western sectors, it was an easy bus ride to the refugee center, a short period of processing, and then out by air from Tempelhof to West Germany and a new existence.

As long as the border to West Berlin remained open, residents from the East came there en masse. Aside from the refugees, one hundred and fifty thousand came daily. Many worked there; others came simply for a look, a shopping trip or a visit with friends. For most people in East Germany, a trip to West Berlin was at least an annual ritual. They returned afterward with their spirits recharged. They had seen the miracle of West Berlin, had sampled its flavor, and experienced its exhilaration. They had seen the showcase of liberty at first hand.

The contrast between life in West Berlin and life in the Soviet zone was striking. For the people of East Germany, West Berlin represented Western civilization—the civilization to which they belonged. Its prosperity was a fact that Communist propaganda could not conceal. Indeed, West Berlin was the best argument against communism in the arsenal of the West. So long as it remained open and flourishing, communism in East Germany could not prosper. In the twelve years since the puppet regime of Walter Ulbricht officially came into existence, communism still had not taken root.

At his Vienna meeting with President Kennedy in June, 1961, Nikita Khrushchev acknowledged as much. The "abnormal" situation in West Berlin, he insisted, must be ended this year. Following Vienna, Khrushchev began the third Soviet offensive since the end of the war to bring this about. A propaganda campaign unusual in its intensity even for the Soviet Union was launched against the continued Allied occupation of West Berlin.

As Khrushchev's verbal attacks mounted in fury during June and July, so did the exodus of refugees from the Communist zone. By August, the stream had turned into a flood. It was a self-fulfilling prophecy; by increasing the tension around Berlin, Khrushchev was increasing the flow of refugees. By increasing the flow of refugees, he was making the position of the Ulbricht regime untenable. By making the position of the Ulbricht regime untenable, he was giving himself a justification to seal the border between East and West Berlin. By the second week-
end of August, Communist action to do just that seemed imminent.  

Shortly after midnight, Sunday, August 13, 1961, the blow fell. The East German News Agency published a special announcement: The Council of Ministers of the German Democratic Republic, at the request of the Warsaw Pact, was putting into effect "those control measures . . . usually introduced along the borders of every sovereign state." The border of the "capital of the German Democratic Republic" (East Berlin) with the Western sectors would be included. Citizens of the GDR (German Democratic Republic) would be permitted to cross this border only with special permission. A simultaneous decree of the East Berlin city government banned all persons living in East Berlin from working in West Berlin.  

No sooner had the announcements been published than measures were under way to put the decrees into effect. At thirty-five minutes past midnight units of the East German Peoples Army rolled into the Potsdamer Platz in the center of Berlin. By two-thirty in the morning the border between the East and Western sectors had been sealed. From Tegel in the north to Rudow in the south East German military units were deployed along the border in tactical formation, deployed as if to withstand an assault by an approaching enemy.  

Several hundred yards behind them hard core factory militia (Betriebskampfgruppen) in brown uniforms mounted a rear guard against possible attack by disgruntled East Berliners, and tanks and machine guns were emplaced at strategic intersections. East Berlin was an armed camp. Barbed wire was strung and light obstacles emplaced. Of the eighty crossing points that had previously existed, only thirteen remained. These were all one way—for West Berliners and foreigners only.  

The border closure was at once effective. The flow of refugees was reduced overnight to an insignificant trickle. Fewer than one hundred managed to cross into West Berlin in the first twenty-four hours after the new measures went into effect. Most of these crossed in the early  

* This did not prevent life from going on much as usual among the Allied forces in Berlin. On August 12, the American command was busily engaged in the climactic phases of a youth carnival organized and conducted for the benefit of the children of American personnel. Brigadier General Frederick O. Hartel, Commander of the Berlin Command, was personally involved. While the carnival was going on he granted an interview to Harry Gilroy of the New York Times. "Emphasize one thing," Hartel told Gilroy, "we are not excited." (New York Times, August 13, 1961.)
hours before the controls were complete. In the following days their numbers would be counted in tens and twenties instead of hundreds and thousands.

The Communists moved rapidly to consolidate their gains. At 4 A.M. Monday morning, August 14, all telephone and postal service between East and West Germany was suspended. Later in the afternoon, the Brandenburg Gate was closed to traffic by an armed cordon of East German Peoples Police (Volkspolizei) supported by tanks and armored cars. The number of crossing points was reduced to twelve. At several of these the street already was being torn up, reducing traffic to a single lane.

At one o'clock Tuesday morning, August 15, all West Berlin vehicles were banned by the East German Ministry of Interior from entering East Berlin. This announcement marked the first direct attack on the rights of Western movement within the city since the border closure began. The puppet regime of Walter Ulbricht was getting bolder. Several hours later, East German police fired for the first time on escaping refugees attempting to make their way into the American sector.

By Tuesday evening the border between East and West had become a fortified frontier. The hasty barbed wire entanglements of Sunday morning were replaced with concrete slabs and formidable antitank barriers, and the entire work took on an appearance of permanence.

For the next several days Communist preparations continued. On Wednesday, movable barriers were installed at each of the twelve remaining crossing points. On Thursday, East German workers began tearing out the rail sections of three elevated (S-Bahn) lines crossing into West Berlin. On Friday, August 18, the Wall itself began to appear. Thousands of laborers worked round the clock pouring cement into prefabricated forms, and by Tuesday evening, August 22, it was virtually complete. A concrete barrier six feet high, one foot wide, and twenty-eight miles long now separated the two sectors of the city. It had arisen in less than five days, and the entire Communist action had taken place in less than ten. Within that time East Berlin physically had been incorporated into the "German Democratic Republic."

The remaining vestiges of four-power occupation in Berlin were quickly reduced by the East German regime to manageable proportions. Until now, little effort had been made to interfere with Allied movement throughout the city. On Wednesday, August 23, however,
the number of crossing points between East and West Berlin was reduced from twelve to seven, all further restricted as to purpose: four for West Berliners, two for West Germans, and one for foreigners, the category into which the Western Allies were neatly fitted. Thus, where formerly they had been free to travel between the two sectors of the city with relative ease, the Western powers now found themselves unable to enter the self-styled “capital of the German Democratic Republic” except through one gate; a gate manned not by their co-occupiers, the Soviet Union, but by the minions of the puppet East German satellite.

The following day, Thursday, August 24, the first refugee was shot and killed attempting to escape. The “abnormal” situation had been brought under control.

For Nikita Khrushchev, the sealing of the East Berlin sector boundary represented a major triumph; the construction of the Wall between East and West Berlin an even greater one. With free movement within the city now a thing of the past, the four-power status of the former German capital was over, and East Berlin passed almost unnoticed behind the Iron Curtain. The boundary of the Soviet zone, a boundary separate and distinct from the territory of Greater Berlin, had been extended to include the eastern sector of the city within its realm. An area of 154 square miles containing 1.1 million people had been annexed unilaterally by the satellite regime of Walter Ulbricht.

But the physical annexation of East Berlin by the German Democratic Republic was only one of the victories of August 13, 1961. By successfully sealing the border between East and West Berlin, the ruinous flow of East German refugees had been halted. The tottering East German government was bolstered, and dissident elements within the Soviet zone now could be brought under control. With the border closed, the satellite bloc could be consolidated. Indeed, with access to West Berlin denied, East Germany itself has been condemned to the prison of international communism.

One effect of the border closure was immediate. Sixty thousand new workers for labor-short East German industry appeared overnight. These were the persons living in East Berlin who formerly had worked in West Berlin. While many were menials, many also were highly
skilled technicians who had continued to live in the East only because it was their home—an important consideration in housing-scarce Berlin. The sudden windfall represented by these workers more than offset the increased exodus caused by Khrushchev’s post-Vienna bluster.

Of perhaps more far-reaching importance, the erection of the East German state frontier between East and West Berlin forced the Western Allies into a position of dealing directly with the hitherto unrecognized Ulbricht regime. After August 13, 1961, the Soviet Union was conspicuously absent from the affairs of East Berlin. The unchallenged border closure effected by the so-called German Democratic Republic thus amounted to a virtual de facto acceptance of East Germany by the Western powers.

In addition, the Communist action of August 13 presented a direct threat to the freedom and viability of West Berlin itself. The immediate effect of the border closure on the sinking morale of West Berlin is well known. In part, this resulted from the Berliners’ frustration at their own inability to counteract the East German measures. In part, the Berliners’ reaction also reflected a feeling of having been betrayed by their Allies. Primarily, however, their despondency derived from a realization that much of the basis for West Berlin’s existence suddenly had disappeared.

On July 25, 1961, three weeks before the East German action took place, President Kennedy said that West Berlin “has many roles.”

It is more than a showcase of liberty, a symbol, an island of freedom in a Communist sea. It is even more than a link with the free world, a beacon of hope behind the Iron Curtain, an escape hatch for refugees.

West Berlin is all of that. But above all it has now become, as never before, the great testing place of Western courage and will, a focal point where our solemn commitments... and Soviet ambitions now meet in basic confrontation.6

After August 13, however, many of the roles which President Kennedy had so eloquently proclaimed no longer fitted. The escape hatch for refugees was closed. The beacon of hope had been dimmed. West Berlin as a link with the free world for the people behind the Iron Curtain no longer existed.

With the border closed, the people of East Germany were prevented from visiting West Berlin. Prevented from visiting West Berlin, they
were deprived of experiencing the wonders of freedom so vigorously in evidence there. The message of the city, the striking contrast between East and West, between communism and democracy, was stilled. The showcase of liberty had lost its lustre.

There was therefore reason for despair in West Berlin immediately following the border closure, for the city might well wither on the vine. With access from the East shut off, access from the West seemed to diminish in importance. Worse, there was danger that the West Berliners, now leery of Allied determination, might panic from the city. Such a flight would only further undermine what was left of West Berlin's resiliency. The West, regardless of its determination, would then be left with an empty and decaying shell.

By sealing the border between East and West Berlin on August 13, 1961, the Communist regime materially altered the balance of power in Central Europe. West Berlin was no longer a bone in Khrushchev's throat. Its disrupting influence among the Communist satellites had been contained. What was formerly an offensive sally port for the Western powers was now, at best, a defensive bastion.

With Berlin's role partially changed, the considerations involved in its defense have also changed. The right of Western access, previously the keystone of the Allied position, is important today only if the economic and spiritual vitality of West Berlin can be preserved, and this can be guaranteed only if West Berlin continues to be a place where people choose to live. West Berlin will be a place where people choose to live only if those who do live there have confidence in its future, are certain of its freedom, and are convinced it will not be forsaken. Accordingly, for the Western Allies, a new dimension has been added to the problem of maintaining the freedom of West Berlin. It is a problem which, to a large degree, the Western powers brought on themselves. Had their response to the events of August 13, been different, it would not be necessary at this late date to prove again their determination to remain.

In many respects, the Allied position in West Berlin is so enmeshed in subtleties, past precedents, and out-dated agreements that a true understanding of exactly what is at stake at any given time or in any given situation is frequently obscured. Certainly, this was true on Au-
gust 13. It was not for several weeks after the border closure, in fact, that a full realization of what had happened actually dawned in the West.

In an article appearing in the *Saturday Evening Post* in December of 1961, former President Dwight Eisenhower remarked: "Others may find it possible to discuss intelligently the current world debates centering about Berlin without reference to its early postwar history. I find this impossible." To this statement one might add that an understanding of the present Western position in Berlin cannot be obtained except through a historical perspective.

It is well known, of course, that the location of Berlin 110 miles behind the Iron Curtain is one of the legacies of World War II. The occupation boundaries, the location of Berlin within the Soviet zone, and the sector divisions within the former German capital all were determined while the war was still in progress (with the exception of the French sector of Berlin [see Chapter VI]). The legal basis for the present Western position in Berlin rests on these agreements. By the same token, the basis for the present crisis may also be found there.