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1

Berlin and the Cold War

Lawrence Freedman

Introduction

When in the early 1960s Peter Watkins, the British documentary maker, wanted to find a way to start World War III to demonstrate the horrors of nuclear war for his film *The War Game* he began at Checkpoint Charlie, the entry-point into East Berlin from the American sector. This was the spot to where Soviet and American tanks had trundled in a famous stand-off in September 1961 before President John F. Kennedy and Chairman Nikita Khrushchev found a way of backing down. He was not alone in his choice. The powder trail from Berlin to a nuclear catastrophe always had a simplicity and credibility that more contrived scenarios lacked. Khrushchev reinforced the link with a ferocious series of nuclear tests, culminating in the largest ever – 56 megatons – in October 1961. Certainly during the tense summer of 1961 Kennedy himself was prepared to give disturbing odds on the Berlin crisis provoking a nuclear war, to the point where he urged construction of fallout shelters as well as higher defence spending.

Even if a crisis had nothing to do with Berlin, that was where it was likely to end up because that was where the West was at its most vulnerable, where the famous choices between suicide or surrender, holocaust or humiliation could well be confronted. Berlin still tended to appear as the flashpoint in scenarios for a European war over the succeeding years, although as the Cold War settled down to a routine, and a new four-power agreement regularised the position of Berlin in the early 1970s, the credibility was becoming strained. Yet even in 1961 it would have taken unusual recklessness and extraordinary bad luck to get a war started. Some famous crisis games organised by the Rand Corporation at the time notably failed to do so. While the construction of the Berlin Wall in

August 1961 was one of the defining moments of the Cold War, and heightened the sense of tension, looking back it now appears as the moment when the crisis was stabilised. Even as it became increasingly apparent that Berlin was, thankfully, unlikely to provide a hot war, it provided the Cold War with its most conspicuous symbol, a regular stop for any visit to the city, a chance to stand and look over into a grey east and compare it with the wealth behind. There was no doubt that the Cold War was really over when the Wall came down in November 1989.

This book harks back to the period when East–West rivalry and antagonism was at its most intense, before it was clear that communism was bound to lose ideologically, and how those involved attempted to manage the tension between the two at this most sensitive point. This chapter offers a background to the Berlin crisis and the issues at its heart as an introduction to the more detailed chapters that follow. In demonstrating its importance to the Cold War my aim is also to show how it captured the essence of the Cold War as a mixture of great power politics and ideological competition.

Berlin and Germany

Berlin was the pivot on which the Cold War turned during the critical period of the late 1950s/early 1960s. If the Cold War was ever going to turn hot Germany always seemed the most probable cause, and Berlin the likely trigger. Germany had already been disturbing European affairs for a century. Its history, size and location meant that if Europe as a whole was to feel secure then some arrangements had to be found that would allow it to function without spreading instability. Germany was divided after World War II – first into four, with American, British, French and Soviet sectors, and then into two, as the three Western sectors coalesced to form the new Federal Republic of Germany, leaving the Soviet sector to turn into the German Democratic Republic. This was a division with which most other European countries felt quite comfortable – ‘I like Germany so much I want two of them’ was a notorious comment from France, not Russia.

One of the two Germanys was liberal capitalist and the other was illiberal socialist. Other schemes for post-war Germany, such as the ‘pastoralisation’ briefly canvassed by the Americans, would have produced a Germany united but denuded of its industrial strength. The rejection of this option, which would have created a dependent state unable to look after itself, meant that instead the two entities engaged in a competition of modern industrial societies, to see which system could best deliver

the goods and address the needs of ordinary people. In relation to their own ideological camps both Germanys were soon to the fore in growth and productivity, but in the competition between the two, West Germany won hands down. This competition was felt most keenly in Berlin, where the two systems operated side by side and where people voted with their feet by seeking refuge in the Western part. It was ideology that gave the Berlin crisis its edge, giving meaning to the balance of power and introducing a particular source of instability.

The ability of Berlin to have this effect was another consequence of the war-time understandings between the United States, Britain and the Soviet Union. These had been expected to provide temporary solutions until something more definitive could be agreed. In the event they turned out to be remarkably durable. The capital might have been left as an integral part of East Germany, but instead, following Germany as a whole, it was also divided into sectors allocated to each of the war-time 'big three' plus France. When Stalin wanted to express his opposition to Western efforts to aid the economic and political recovery of Germany he responded, in 1948, by laying siege to West Berlin. It survived as a liberal outpost with the utmost difficulty. Whatever the prudent thoughts of later years that the Cold War would have been neater and tidier and therefore more stable if the West had accepted a *fait accompli* in the face of this pressure, the city's population was kept fed, clothed and heated until well into 1949 by means of a stupendous allied effort, requiring a massive and unceasing airlift. This made Berlin a source of pride and a sort of prize. It was a Western trophy in the communist heartland, and the foundation for the healing process between the Western democracies and their recent enemy.

West Germany, led from its creation until 1963 by Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, accepted its dependence upon its new-found allies in NATO. It was well aware of the hostility of Moscow, and the sheer weight of military power that faced it from across the inner-German border. It relied upon the allies, and in particular nuclear deterrence as provided by the United States, to keep this power at bay. Adenauer found the dependence uncomfortable. It was not hard to imagine how Germany might be let down. Instead of resisting a Soviet-led invasion on the border the allies might be tempted to conduct a strategic retreat, so that Germany would provide a battleground and see its own society trampled underfoot by warring armies. Hence the insistence in NATO planning on Forward Defence, so there could be no doubt that not a metre of West German territory was to be conceded. If push really came to shove it was still hard to be confident that the allies would accept the risk of facing

a nuclear catastrophe in order to defend Germany. And with such thoughts in the back of their minds, could Western political leaders, especially such conciliators (in German eyes) as Harold Macmillan of Britain and Kennedy of the United States, be tempted to reach a deal with Khrushchev at Germany's expense.

At one level this was unthinkable. Gloomy as they were over the predicament in which they found themselves because of Berlin, and irritated as they were by Adenauer's incessant demands for reassurance that no sell-out was planned, neither London or Washington accepted that they could concede any part of West Germany or West Berlin in battle or through negotiation. The difficulty was that the position they were supposed to defend was not so straightforward. They had also been asked to sign up to Bonn's view that no long-term position other than unification of all Germany could be accepted, and that allied rights in East Berlin must be preserved, if only as an earnest of a refusal to accept the *de facto* post-World War II settlement.

To the Soviet Union the *status quo* of a divided Germany was as good an arrangement as likely to be found in the context of the Cold War, and as good a guarantee as was available that it was unlikely to break out of the flimsy post-war constraints and indulge in another bout of aggressive activity, directed as before in Russia's direction. In public the West refused to sign up to a permanent division, thereby raising the spectre of the marriage between German militarism and American imperialism that provided the staple imagery for propagandists. In practice the West was more satisfied with the *status quo* than could be officially admitted. Even Adenauer was not interested in early unification, which he saw as threatening the electoral position of his Christian Democrats. He clung to the objective of unification as a means of selling to his countrymen the attachment to the West, although that must in the first instance accentuate the division and rule out a united but neutralist option. Adenauer did not see neutralisation as an option: Germany would be left at the mercy of well-armed neighbours. By opting for the West he had been able to set in motion the process of rehabilitation, including rearmament which was authorised under the 1954 Paris agreements, albeit with safeguards which were meant to be taken seriously. This certainly had the polarising effect feared. An exaggerated prospect of German revanchism was used to scare the Soviet satellite countries into an artificial solidarity. The Warsaw Pact was itself set up as a notional response to German rearmament.

The instability in the situation, however, stemmed not from West Germany's aspirations, nor really from anxieties about these aspirations

in Central and Eastern Europe. It stemmed from the weak ideological hold the communist parties had on popular opinion, and the consequent necessity to maintain order by means of the full apparatus of repression. As Hungary demonstrated in 1956, local repression could always be backed up by Soviet tanks, but by and large the local effort, supplemented on occasion by the odd concession, sufficed. The state socialist system had been imposed on the 'liberated' countries of Central and Eastern Europe because Stalin wanted an ideological as well as physical buffer. Stalin could not allow any of the satellite states to develop distinctive forms of socialism because that would cast doubt on the validity of his own model. Vanguard parties had to lead, because the links these parties had to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union provided an essential instrument of control. Only Tito in Yugoslavia, who had his own political base as a result of leading the partisans during the German occupation, was able to resist Stalin's dominance. By the late 1950s communist parties had been marginalised in western countries, with the ideological stuffing knocked out of them by Khrushchev's 1956 denunciations of Stalinism.

The basic source of instability in Europe was the illegitimate and therefore frail Soviet hold over its European satellites. The repressive apparatus was sufficiently robust and intimidating to keep the lid on popular disaffection. Only in Berlin did this fail, because only in Berlin was there a semblance of a choice. By the start of the 1960s people were transferring in large numbers from East to West in search of a better life. This might have been considered a useful safety valve. The malcontents and troublemakers could be let go, but this risked including the bulk of the educated, professional work force. This was not the only source of tension in the Berlin situation – the fact that the city had the highest density of spies per square metre was another – but until the Wall went up in August 1961 it provided the major motor to the crisis, a proposition underlined by the fact that the crisis subsided following the Wall, albeit not immediately. In the run up to the Wall's construction the gathering sense of crisis stimulated an even larger flow of refugees, and helped to bring the crisis to a head.

So while Khrushchev was happy with the *status quo* as far as a divided Germany was concerned he was extremely unhappy with the *status quo* in Berlin. It allowed a Western showcase into the heart of communist territory, and it became even more of a showcase as West Berliners' lifestyles were heavily subsidised to persuade them to stay in the city and not migrate back into West Germany proper for a less isolated and fraught existence. Garrisons of British, French and American troops were

also permitted and rights for these countries to roam around East Berlin. It was the garrisons that provided the basis for the autobahn and air corridors from West Germany to Berlin. Whether the allies ever really believed they had obligations to the people of East Berlin was another matter – Khrushchev eventually correctly gambled that they did not – but so long as the showcase and the garrison were in place, then Berlin would be a source of insecurity for all communist regimes.

Western attitudes to the Berlin question

From the Western point of view the ideological advantages provided by the sustenance of West Berlin were not matched on the military side. Located well into East Germany territory, in strict terms it was not defensible by NATO. If the East Germans and the Soviet Union decided to squeeze Berlin they could do so. The occupying powers – Britain, France and the United States – could respond, but only at the risk of escalation. Somehow they had to convince Moscow that if their units were overwhelmed then a nuclear riposte was a possibility. So the Warsaw Pact was much better placed for a military showdown. The East's position had improved since the days of the airlift: now more aggressive measures could be taken against aircraft making use of the air corridors. Furthermore, the backdrop to the 1958–61 crisis was an apparent Soviet confidence that the 'correlation of forces' was shifting decisively in its favour. The first intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) test and the first artificial earth satellite, Sputnik I, in 1957 undoubtedly gave Moscow a public relations boost and caused a crisis in self-confidence in the United States. This was the era of the 'missile gap' with Khrushchev egging on alarmist generals, senators and pundits in the West with his talk of missiles coming off the Soviet production lines like sausages. There was doubt for the first time as to whether the capitalist system was inherently more innovative and technologically advanced than the communist. The key strategic issue was whether it would also give Moscow a sufficiently material military boost so that it could force the pace in a crisis.

President Eisenhower was dubious that the Soviet position was as good as Khrushchev and American alarmists claimed, and he made the political judgement that Khrushchev did not want war, especially on behalf of Germany. He held to this view when the Soviet leader upped the ante with his ultimatum in 1958, and he refused to show any sign of uncertainty or hesitation when it came to sticking up for the established Western position on Berlin and the German question. History has

treated his judgement more kindly than did contemporary opinion. Contrary to the fears of the missile gap proponents, who saw this as a time of great strategic peril, mutual deterrence was working. Minds were concentrated less by the faint prospect of a nuclear victory than the likely consequences of any nuclear war, almost irrespective of how it began and finished.

One of the most important critics of Eisenhower's sanguinity was Dean Acheson, who had been Harry Truman's Secretary of State during the formative years of the Cold War. He had taken the view then that over the longer term (which he hoped to extend through the development of the 'hydrogen' bomb) nuclear weapons could not work to the West's strategic advantage because of the ease with which they could be neutralised. Acheson advocated instead the build up of conventional forces to match those of the communists. This was the message of his most famous publication – NSC 68 – which in 1950 operationalised containment in military as well as political terms. Eisenhower had balked at the cost of the rearmament required by NSC 68 and authorised as a result of the Korean War and decided that, at least for the time being, there was more deterrence to be extracted from the nuclear strength of the US. Acheson had seen this as a wasted opportunity and now, as the Kremlin gained the upper hand in the nuclear as well as the conventional field, he was convinced that the balance of power was swinging further away and Khrushchev need only bide his time.

In 1961, as he was called upon to advise a new President from the Democratic Party, John Kennedy, he was urging that the balance of power must swing back, and that this required major investment in conventional forces backed by a serious display of courage when it came to contemplating nuclear war. Without this, whenever the Warsaw Pact pushed, NATO was fated to crumble, as the weaker brethren among the allies (and he had the British particularly in mind) would succumb to the first whiff of war. When Khrushchev used his first, and only, summit with Kennedy in June 1961 to revive his Berlin ultimatum, Acheson saw his worst fears being realised and for some weeks he even convinced Kennedy that this was so. His argument, however, had become too fateful. While Eisenhower could stand firm because he did not believe the military ground was slipping from under him, Acheson had managed to create a powerful argument for concessions unless he could identify military measures that could retrieve matters in short order. As geography would always tell against the West in the defence of Berlin, and as the allies could not put on a credible show of nonchalance in the face of nuclear hostilities this was not going to be possible.

At one level concessions were not too hard to find and need not be that controversial. The refusal to formalise the *de facto* division of Germany and the rest of Europe was perfectly compatible with this geopolitical fact and it was hard to see how anybody was going to go to war to protect something as apparently trivial (certainly when compared with the devastation of Western civilisation) as allied rights in East Berlin. Nor were there profound objections to keeping West Germany non-nuclear, although it would be difficult to find a formula that did not single out Germany as a special case. The problem was that to be able to claim diplomatic progress Khrushchev needed the departure of the garrisons from West Berlin and the unification of the city under East German supervision. Those in the West, and in particular Macmillan and Kennedy, who wanted a deal just to remove this issue from East-West relations, could not go that far and so there was no deal to be done. There was, however, a lot to be talked about, and in the end the 1961 crisis was deflated by Western diplomats demonstrating that they could engage in tedious and non-productive negotiations as stubbornly as their Russian counterparts. Another reason why Khrushchev became more cautious when he failed to intimidate Kennedy into concessions was that by the autumn of 1961 his bluff had been exposed. Informed by a combination of reconnaissance satellites and the spy Oleg Penkovsky, the Americans were happy to report that the missile gap had failed to materialise, except in a reverse sense that they enjoyed a lead in the production and deployment of ICBMs which they intended to extend. One reason why the Soviet leader tried to get medium-range missiles into Cuba the next year was as a quick means to redress the balance, and to provide him with a sufficient propaganda coup so that he might even be able to revive pressure on Kennedy over Berlin. Certainly in October 1962 the president was convinced that the Cuban missile crisis would end in Berlin – the natural response to an American blockade of the Caribbean island was a Russian blockade of this German island.

Conclusion

After the Cuban missile crisis, Berlin never loomed as large on the superpower agenda as it had done in the early 1960s. Under Live Oak's umbrella the key NATO countries continued with contingency planning, although fortunately the fact that the main contingency of a communist attempt to cut the city off never arose, meant that it did not matter too much that the planners and their governments had never managed to

resolve the difficult issues of principles that would have arisen once an escalatory process began in earnest. With the people of East Berlin trapped they were unable to challenge the communist state by leaving and they knew too much about Soviet attitudes to try an insurrection. With both sides acknowledging that there was no hope of a real military victory in any NATO–Warsaw Pact war, physical force offered no means of changing the balance of political power in Europe. On the surface the Cold War congealed all political relations, providing them with a permanence that they could not have otherwise sustained. Beneath the surface the communist system was in terminal decline, unable to compete in terms of freedom and prosperity with the West. In 1989 the pressure of events in East Germany, as well as the development of an alternative escape route via Hungary into Austria, led to the Wall being breached. This set Germany on its way to being united, confirming Adenauer's claims to his people that the apparent provocation to the East of alignment to the West would eventually serve their national purpose, and the Soviet empire in Europe was in retreat. Soon the Soviet Union itself would fragment. The Berlin Wall signified the separation of two competing ideological systems. Once one of those systems became drained of legitimacy the separation became pointless.

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