

Berlin, 1961



Coils of barbed wire block access to the Brandenburg Gate, August 1961. The sign, "Attention — You Are Now Leaving West Berlin," seems no longer to apply.

ing wore on, groups of West Berliners began to gather, to watch and jeer. West Berlin mayor Willy Brandt was concerned that the situation might get out of hand. The East German government also feared public protests, like those that nearly had brought down the regime in 1953. Construction of the barrier was carried out entirely by East German public works gangs, supervised by militias mobilized from all parts of the state. A few miles back, ringing the city, Soviet tanks openly took up positions — and waited. Their presence sent a message to the West not to intervene and to the East Germans not to attempt a protest. The streets of East Berlin remained eerily empty.

The moment picked to divide the city could not have been better chosen. By the time it was clear what was going on, it was still the middle of the night in Washington. As reports poured in, the three Allied military commanders in West Berlin quickly met, but they realized that nothing could be done until their political masters decided what response to make. The American commander had it drilled into him that he must take no action that might spark trouble. He and the British commander felt they ought to issue a protest to their Russian counterpart in East Berlin, but the French commander would not support even this without instructions from Paris. However, the French were in the middle of their traditional August vacation, and the foreign ministry on the Quai d'Orsay was virtually empty. It might take days to get a response.

At the State Department in Washington, officials were called out of their beds early on Sunday morning, but a decision was made not to react. The president was not even officially informed until midmorning, late afternoon Berlin time. By this point the barbed-wire fence had been largely built. Kennedy regarded the barrier as despicable, but what angered him more was



The cover of the Frankfurter Illustrierte, 23 July 1961, expresses the concern of West Germans and their chancellor as they look to West Berlin. Would it remain a free city?

Crossing the Wall

Throughout the summer of 1961 Berlin witnessed extraordinary scenes as the Wall was completed. The dividing line ran alongside and even through several old tenement buildings, sometimes with doorways in the East and back windows looking out onto the West. As other crossing points were closed, people in despair resorted to these tenement windows as a route to escape. One fifty-nine-year-old woman threw a mattress out of her window and leapt after it. She died of her injuries. When anyone appeared ready to jump, the West Berlin fire department sent firemen with blankets to catch them. In full view of news cameras, a surreal

tug-of-war took place over one lady; the East German police tried to drag her back through the window of her border tenement, while West Berlin firemen tried to pull her safely to the street below. To cheers, she eventually reached the Western sector. Slowly, all of the tenement windows on the border were bricked up. Whole areas, up to a hundred yards behind the Wall, were levelled. A nightmarish world of searchlights, desolate watchtowers, machine-gun posts, and minefields came into being. Soon the first East German was shot dead trying to escape. There would be dozens more.



BELOW LEFT AND RIGHT: East Berliners escape to the West by climbing out windows lining the border. All of these were soon bricked up. BELOW: An East German policeman removes the body of Peter Fechter, shot while trying to escape across the Wall. He had lain there for hours, bleeding to death.

that no one had anticipated this outcome. “Why didn’t we know?” he asked McGeorge Bundy, his national security adviser. Closing the borders violated four-power agreements over Berlin, but once it became clear to Washington that neither the East Germans nor the Soviets were going to move against West Berlin itself, there was a collective sigh of relief. Kennedy and his secretary of state, Dean Rusk, agreed that so long as the access routes to West Berlin were left open and the city was still free, whatever might occur in East Berlin was no cause for war. It was decided to protest “through appropriate channels” to Moscow and to do nothing more.

Fencing West Berlin’s 103-mile perimeter with barbed wire took most of Sunday. During that time many East Germans decided “now or never” and made a last-minute dash to the West. Some swam across the Teltow Canal, which made up part of the border, and arrived dripping in the West with nothing but their underwear. A Volkswagen crashed through the barbed wire before it reached too high. Even a few policemen leapt to freedom as the barbed-wire barricade was being built. Dividing the city separated families in a brutal way. Some who had gone to relatives in East Berlin for the weekend now found they could not return to the West. Others could only gather along the wire barrier and wave to relatives on the opposite side.

Three days after the barbed wire went up, additional East German workers arrived and began constructing a more permanent concrete structure. Set a few yards back from the wire fence, this was the real Berlin Wall. Five to six feet high, topped with barbed wire, and eventually buttressed by gun positions and tank traps, the Berlin Wall became an obstruction almost impossible to cross. It tore the city down the middle.

The West Let Off the Hook

For a week Kennedy made no public comment. Willy Brandt was furious at the American failure to react. At a huge public rally he appealed to the West, proclaiming, "Berlin expects more than words. Berlin expects political action!" Brandt wrote directly to Kennedy, saying that the Wall "has not altered the will to resist of the population of West Berlin, but it has succeeded in casting doubt upon the capability and determination of the Three Powers to react."



Some American newspapers responded that no "mere mayor" could dictate US policy. But in any case, as it became clear that there would be no Communist threat against West Berlin itself, and no action against the access routes to the city, the Western powers felt they had been let off the hook. The leakage of the East German population had been sealed off by a crude and bizarre structure, but war had been avoided.

Kennedy sent General Lucius Clay, the bullish commander of the American sector during the 1948 airlift, and Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson to visit Berlin. They were rapturously received by the West Berliners. In front of a giant crowd outside the town hall, Johnson affirmed America's pledge "to the freedom of West Berlin and to the rights of Western access." At the same time, an American combat unit of 1,500 well-armed soldiers was sent up the East German autobahn from West Germany to reinforce the Allied garrison in West Berlin. The Soviets stopped and counted them but then let them pass. On arriving, they paraded down the main street of West Berlin, the Kurfürsten Damm, amidst cheering, weeping crowds. The unit's commander said it was the most fabulous reception he had experienced since the liberation of Paris in 1944. West Berliners now felt assured they would not be abandoned.

Berliners thought the West was slow to react to the Wall.

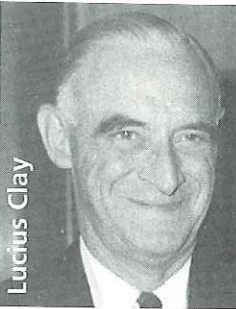
ABOVE: Mayor Willy Brandt bolstered the spirits of West Berliners on 17 August 1961 and demanded action.

OPPOSITE: Kennedy sent his vice president, Lyndon Johnson (centre), to show solidarity with the city.

Most of the old crossing points were closed. The East Germans allowed the use of only seven. Although West Berliners were not denied continued access to East Berlin, they needed special permits. And only one crossing point would permit other Westerners to cross into the East. This gateway would enter Cold War mythology as the place where East met West: Checkpoint Charlie, the exchange point for spies.

Rusk and Soviet foreign minister Andrei Gromyko continued to talk, into the fall, about finding a political solution to the Berlin stalemate. Khrushchev even invited Kennedy to Moscow. The president declined the invitation but agreed to set up a confidential back channel through which personal views could be exchanged. Kennedy decided to ask General Clay to return to West Berlin as his special representative, but McGeorge Bundy warned him that "Clay will be a burden to you if he takes a line more belligerent than yours." Kennedy insisted that his appointment would reassure Berliners. Clay, on the other hand, believed he was being sent to Berlin to take on the Soviets. As soon as he arrived he ordered the building of a concrete wall at a military training school, so his soldiers could practice knocking it down.

Towards the end of October a senior American diplomat and his wife were denied access to East Berlin to attend the theatre, because they refused to show the East German border guards their passports. The four-party agree-



Lucius Clay



Berlin Wall

ments that governed the city guaranteed free movement of Allied and Soviet personnel without passport formalities, so Clay sent a squad of armed US soldiers to force the issue and accompany the diplomat in his car into East Berlin. Over the next few days, American jeeps started to convoy US civilians on pointless excursions into East Berlin, each jeep full of battle-ready soldiers ostentatiously flaunting rifles. Ten American M-48 tanks were pulled up near Checkpoint Charlie.

On the morning of 27 October, thirty-three Soviet tanks rolled into East Berlin and halted at the Brandenburg Gate, the first Soviet armour in the city since the uprising of 1953. Ten tanks drove on to Checkpoint Charlie and lined up facing the American armour barely a hundred yards away. For the first time in the Cold War, American and Russian tanks directly faced each other across a tense border. The American gunners loaded their cannons and awaited orders. An alarmed Kennedy spoke with Clay from the White House but assured him of his full support. As the hours passed the situation grew even more tense. The US garrison in West Berlin was on full alert, then NATO was put on alert, then Strategic Air Command. The Soviet military commander had a direct line to the Kremlin. Khrushchev told him that should the Americans use force, he must respond with force. Commanders on both sides were worried that, in all the tension, some nervous soldier would fire his weapon and trigger a shoot-out. A petty dispute over showing passports at a border crossing threatened to escalate into a global conflict.

Both sides realized that the situation had got out of hand. Through the back channel just set up, Kennedy sent a message directly to Khrushchev asking that the Russians withdraw and assuring him that the Americans would do the same.

At Checkpoint Charlie, after a sixteen-hour standoff, the first Soviet tank started up its engine and withdrew five yards. The tension was broken. A few minutes later, an American tank pulled back the same distance. One by one the tanks withdrew. There was another sigh of relief. Clay, however, was done for. General Bruce Clarke, commander of US forces in West Germany, demanded, "What in the hell did Clay think he was doing? You don't spit in the face of a bulldog." NATO's commander was furious that an unplanned dispute had threatened to engulf his forces in a conflict that could not be won. Clay remained in Berlin a few months longer and then was called home. And, without publicity, Washington ordered civilian officials not to visit East Berlin for the time being.

Both sides had decided that the dispute over Berlin was an issue of principle at the heart of their Cold War stance. This threatened the world with nuclear holocaust. Neither side had wanted the Wall, but building it was a way of avoiding direct military conflict. Kennedy said, "It's not a very nice solution, but a wall is a hell of a lot better than a war." Khrushchev too defused the situation; his threat to sign a peace treaty with East Germany was quietly forgotten. He told Ulbricht, the disappointed East German leader, "Steps which would exacerbate the situation, especially in Berlin, should be avoided." The world was left with a concrete symbol of the cruel divisions of the Cold War.

Soviet and American tanks confront each other, only gun barrels apart, at the Friedrichstrasse crossing point (Checkpoint Charlie). This was one of the tensest moments of the Cold War, but in the end both sides backed off.



Instructions were given to our tank commander that he was to roll up and confront the Soviet tank, which was at the identical distance across from Checkpoint Charlie. The tension escalated very rapidly for the one reason that this was Americans confronting Russians. It wasn't East Germans. There was live ammunition in both tanks of the Russians and the Americans. It was an unexpected, sudden confrontation that in my opinion was the closest that the Russians and the Allies came to going to war in the entire Cold War period.

— Col. Jim Atwood,
US military mission, Berlin

In June 1963, at the end of a trip to West Germany, President Kennedy made a visit to West Berlin. He looked at the Wall, and over it into East Berlin, and then addressed a crowd of a quarter of a million Berliners from the balcony of the town hall, which overlooked the square that later would bear his name.

"There are many people in the world who really don't understand, or say they don't, what is the great issue between the free world and the Communist world. Let them come to Berlin. There are some who say that communism is the wave of the future. Let them come to Berlin. And there are some who say in Europe and elsewhere we can work with the Communists. Let them come to Berlin. And there are even a few who say that it is true that communism is an evil system but it permits us to make economic progress. *Lasst sie nach Berlin kommen.* Let them come to Berlin. . . . Freedom is indivisible, and when one man is enslaved, all are not free. When all are free, and we look forward to that day, when this city will be joined as one, and this country, and this great continent of Europe in a peaceful and hopeful globe, when that day finally comes, as it will, the people of West Berlin can take sober satisfaction in the fact that they were in the front lines for almost two decades. All free men, wherever they may live, are citizens of Berlin, and therefore as a free man, I take pride in the words *Ich bin ein Berliner.*" All cheered. Some smiled. *Ein Berliner* is what they called a popular local doughnut.



26 June 1963. John F. Kennedy, on a state visit, addresses hundreds of thousands of cheering West Berliners. "I am one of you," he tells them. "Ich bin ein Berliner."