**Why Berlin Mattered: How could one city mean so much?  
Fred Kaplan**

Berlin was always the centerpiece of the Cold War and, more often than many remember, very nearly the front line of real combat.

At the end of World War II, the city was divided into four sectors, each occupied by one of the four allied armies—U.S., Soviet, British, and French. As the East-West divide hardened into a Cold War, so, too, did the division of the city, into East and West Berlin.

Clearly West Berlin was an anomaly: an island of freedom locked 100 miles inside Soviet-controlled East Germany. In 1948, Josef Stalin mounted a blockade, cutting off the city from its Western suppliers. The United States responded with an airlift that went on for 300 days, until Stalin finally backed off and signed an agreement with the other three powers, guaranteeing Western access to the enclave.

Ten years later, Nikita Khrushchev resumed the pressure, announcing that within six months, he would declare the '48 agreement "null and void" and placing all of Berlin under East German sovereignty—which is to say, under Soviet control. If the West resisted, he said, there would be war.

Western intelligence agencies didn't know it at the time, but Khrushchev's threat stemmed from desperation. Over the previous decade, West Berlin had grown free and prosperous while East Berlin had stagnated under the Soviet boot. Easterners were emigrating to the West in droves, using West Berlin as their transit point. By the fall of 1958, East Germany had lost 2 million people, with continued losses of 10,000 per month, including some of its best-educated youth. Khrushchev needed to stop the hemorrhage.

When the Western leaders ignored his threat, Khrushchev knew that he would have to backpedal. The threat was a bluff; the Soviet military and economy were in dire shape; its vaunted missile program was in tatters.

So, at the start of 1959, Khrushchev sent his deputy prime minister, Anastas Mikoyan, on a goodwill trip to America, and in September, he made the voyage himself, the first time any Soviet premier had visited the United States. It was a trip of high drama and comedy from coast to coast. But the trip's purpose was fulfilled at the end, on Sept. 26 and 27, when Khrushchev and President Dwight Eisenhower met at Camp David.

At meals, the two leaders chatted amiably, mainly about their experiences in World War II. During their formal talks, they talked frankly about Berlin

Khrushchev admitted that he'd acted brashly in declaring an ultimatum on Berlin, but he said he'd been exasperated by the incessant pressure. Eisenhower acknowledged that West Berlin was an "abnormal" entity, but he emphasized that the American people would never allow anyone to grab the city unilaterally. It wasn't just a symbol of freedom. Two million people lived there; Washington was obliged to protect their security. Khrushchev asked whether he could have some assurance that the United States did not intend to occupy Berlin permanently. Eisenhower responded that he'd be very surprised if Western troops remained there for another 25 years.

At the end of the meeting, Eisenhower agreed to a summit in Paris the following year involving the four powers that had occupied Berlin since the end of the war. On the agenda would be Berlin and disarmament.

Khrushchev returned to Moscow elated. He told a Communist Party plenary session that, judging from his conversations not just with the president but with industrial leaders, most Americans did not want war and that the U.S. economy could grow without huge military spending—heresy to Leninist doctrine.

In January 1960, he gave a public speech to the Supreme Soviet, laying out an extravagant disarmament plan as a prelude to the upcoming Paris summit. The Soviets would unilaterally withdraw 1 million troops—one-third of the Soviet army—from Eastern Europe and invite NATO to respond in kind. He would also destroy all Soviet missiles and discuss on-site inspection to verify that the United States did the same.

Even Allen Dulles, the hawkish director of the CIA, thought Khrushchev's speech represented a "sea change" in Soviet policy.

Stateside, Air Force generals and congressional Democrats were spreading reports that the Soviets were way ahead of the United States in ICBMs. Eisenhower knew that the most highly classified intelligence—based on secret flights of U-2 spy planes over Soviet territory—contradicted that claim. Still, the evidence wasn't clear. Dulles said that one more U-2 flight would settle the matter. Eisenhower, who'd halted the flights after Soviet complaints, authorized one more, to take place on May Day 1960.

The rest is sad history. A Soviet air-defense battery shot down the plane. The pilot, Francis Gary Powers, did not swallow the cyanide pill as he was supposed to. The Soviets displayed the downed plane. Eisenhower, assuming Powers was dead, lied and said the plane must have veered off course. Meanwhile, Soviet intelligence officers interrogated Powers, learned the truth—then produced Powers himself, much to Eisenhower's embarrassment.

Khrushchev, who had taken great political risks in cuddling up to the West, stormed out of the Paris summit and withdrew his disarmament plan. The prospects for Soviet reform and East-West peace vanished, not to be revived for another 27 years.

The main point, though, is this: Even if there hadn't been a U-2 crisis, the Paris summit was doomed to failure. Khrushchev's disarmament offer was contingent on the West's giving up Berlin. And, as Eisenhower told him (and as the Western European leaders affirmed), that wasn't going to happen.

Meanwhile, young Eastern Europeans were still leaving the Soviet empire through West Berlin. When John F. Kennedy became president in January 1961, Khrushchev renewed his threats.

Finally, on Aug. 13, Khrushchev ordered East German troops to occupy the border separating the two halves of the city and to lay the first layers of brick and barbed wire of what would become the Berlin Wall.

In a sense, the wall marked the end of Khrushchev's crisis. But Kennedy took the move as the possible beginning of a wider threat. He poured money into the defense budget for conventional forces; he even seriously, though briefly, considered a plan to launch a disarming first strike against the Soviet Union should Khrushchev try to occupy West Berlin.

By October, the Soviets had closed off all but one border crossing. On Oct. 27, in a now-forgotten confrontation (one year before the Cuban missile crisis), Soviet and American tanks faced each other along that checkpoint, at short range, for 16 hours until negotiations were held and the Soviet tanks backed off. The crisis faded.

There would never be another crisis over Berlin (which may be why all the previous ones have largely been forgotten). The Soviet rulers had no need to threaten West Berlin as long as the wall kept their own people locked in.

The wall was built to bottle up an incipient revolt—a mass emigration that threatened to expose the Soviet system as inferior to the West, as an oppressive dungeon that its most educated young people yearned to escape. The wall not only blocked those yearnings; it also made clear to the brighter young Soviet and Eastern European leaders that the system itself—the ideological basis of their rule—was suspect, that it could not be sustained, much less compete with the West, without the internal imposition of force.

Khrushchev was ousted by hardliners in 1964. For the next quarter-century, the Kremlin's leaders devolved into increasingly sluggish bureaucrats; the system itself bogged down more and more obviously. In 1988, when Mikhail Gorbachev set a course of serious reform and reopened the Soviet Union to the world, the possibilities that had been unleashed in the late 1950s, but suppressed ever since, once more bubbled up in the popular imagination. And when the wall came down, it was like a cork exploding.

The end of the Soviet Union—and, with it, the end of the Cold War—was, at that point, nearly inevitable.

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