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The Forgotten Third Post-War Berlin Crisis

The Mobilization of the Reserves

Marvin L. Simner

Abstract

Two major crises occurred during the occupation of Berlin shortly after the end of World War II, both of which have been well documented and are summarized below. There was a third crisis, however, that has been largely forgotten but produced a substantial alteration in the organization of the National Guard, the Army Ready Reserve units, and the authority given to the president to mobilize the reserves. The purpose of this report is to review the events that surrounded this third crisis and how the impact of these events may have contributed to the Cuban Missile Crisis that took place in October, 1962.

The First and Second Berlin Crises

At the end of World War II Berlin was divided into four sectors: American, British, French, and Russian. The Russian sector was known as East Berlin, the American, British and French sectors were known, collectively, as West Berlin. Those who resided in East Berlin lived under a Communist or state controlled system of government while those in West Berlin experienced a Capitalist or free enterprise system of government. Needless to say, this post-war change in the demographics of Berlin represented a serious challenge to the West as well as to the East since each side was now forced to deal with the other over a border that not only divided the city, but also led to substantial disputes that could have erupted in a nuclear war.

The first Berlin crisis stemmed from a seemingly intractable disagreement between the Soviets and the Western powers over how best to deal with a serious currency problem.

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When the west (German) mark was first introduced in June of 1948, military government regulations provided that it was to circulate alongside the Soviet-sponsored east (German) mark, and that both currencies were to be legal tender for essential purchases and payments. This provision was intended to facilitate reunification of the city's economy in the event that the Soviets agreed on four-power currency control. The arrangement, while politically justifiable, was catastrophic in its economic effects. Although legally the east mark was the equivalent of the west mark, its real value rarely exceeded 30 percent of that of the western money.¹

Even though it is generally agreed that it was market forces alone that led to the devaluation of the East German mark, nevertheless, the Soviet Union blamed the West for causing the devaluation. As a result, and in retaliation against the West, the Soviet Union launched the first Berlin crisis in June, 1948, which was a military blockade that ended in January, 1949, largely as the result of the Berlin Airlift initiated by the West. To resolve this conflict, In March, 1949, the two sides agreed to employ the West German mark throughout both the East and West sectors.

Unfortunately, for the Soviet Union this decision meant "...the definite recognition that Berlin belonged to West ideologically and politically and that it must be bound to the West economically."² Hence, the outcome of the first crisis did little to promote harmony between the two sides.

The second Berlin crisis resulted from the East Berlin refugee exodus that began around 1949 and lasted through 1961. At the end of World War II the residents of East and West Berlin were given free access to both sides of the divided city which meant that the traffic flow across the border was largely unimpaired. Indeed, many who lived in East Berlin worked in West Berlin and vice versa. Despite this freedom of movement, it has been estimated that well over 4 million East Germans (out of a population of around 17 million) left East Berlin as refugees and sought permanent immigration status in the west. It is said that up until that time this number, was "the greatest voluntary mass migration in recorded European history."³ Among the refugees that fled East Germany, there were 17,080 engineers and technicians, 17,476 teachers and academics, as well as 3,371 physicians.⁴

These departures from East Germany caused a serious problem for the East German economy that Khrushchev tried to resolve through discussions with Eisenhower and later with Kennedy. As the result of the strong anti-communist sentiment in the United States throughout the 1950s as witnessed, for example, by the McCarthy hearings, neither president was willing to discuss the problem. In commenting on this matter Kempe (2011) concluded that "...nothing threatened Khrushchev more than the deteriorating situation in divided Berlin. His critics (in East Germany and Russia) complained that he was allowing the communist world's most perilous wound to fester. East Berlin was hemorrhaging refugees to the West at an alarming rate."⁵ In the East, the solution to this escalating problem was the need to close the border between the two sides, and it was this solution that subsequently led Nikita Khrushchev to call

Berlin “the most dangerous place on earth” because by October, 1961, the Soviets and the Americans were clearly at the brink of nuclear war with their tanks merely yards apart from each other at the border crossing known as Checkpoint Charlie.

The Forgotten Third Berlin Crisis

Because of the extremely perilous nature of the second Berlin crisis in July, 1961, a Congressional resolution was proposed that authorized the President to order units and members of the Ready Reserve to active duty for not more than 12 months during which time the military would increase its draft call with the aim of eventually achieving a standing army of 1,000,000 men.⁶ On July 31 the House approved this proposal in a vote of 403-to-2.⁷ Although the authorization allowed the President to mobilize up to 250,000 men, the actual recall was carried out in a two-stage process; the first stage involved 76,500 men who were told to report for active duty by October 1, 1961 whereas 82,357 men in the second stage were told to report by October 15, 1961.⁸ The following material captures the tone as well as the nature of the events that unfolded throughout the mobilization period.

As mentioned above, all of the units affected by the mobilization order were expected to reach their assigned destinations by mid-October. The act of mobilization was expected to reveal a strong willingness on the part of the reservists to serve their country and would therefore serve as a countervailing threat to the Soviet Union.⁹ In the months that followed, however, a number of reports appeared in the press that suggested just the opposite, namely, a clear unwillingness among many of the reservists to support the President’s initiative.

The first of these reports began to appear in late October: “hundreds of New York and New Jersey military reservists have appealed to their Congressmen for information or help in getting deferments from active duty during the current defense build-up.” Senator Keating had received about 350 letters, Senator Javits had received around 100 inquiries, and somewhere between 100 to 150 inquires had been sent to Senator Williams.¹⁰ In response to these along with many other congressional appeals the commanding officer on one Army base had the following to say about this matter.

Lt. Gen. Hamilton H. Howze, Commanding General of the Strategic Army Corps and Ft. Bragg Military Reservation, here criticized “soft Army reservists” who could not serve, he said, without complaints to Congressmen. In a speech to a Fayetteville Civic Club, he called the complainer American youths...either duck-tailed slobs or intelligent and frightened of the Soviet challenge.¹¹

While family hardships were often given as justification for the appeals, one of the most frequently cited complaints was contained in a letter to the *New York Times* in early December by Irwin Tyler.

As a Reservist, now stationed at Fort Dix, I can honestly say that my feelings are those of 95 percent of the men in my unit. We Reservists would willingly and proudly serve our nation in a situation which found us in immediate peril for our existence. We believe no such situation existed. Therefore, we are attempting to find someone who can convince us of this "need"...There have been flare-ups in Berlin ever since the city was divided, and no previous mobilization was initiated. From this time forth, will every new "crisis" bring with it a new series of mobilizations? Certainly the calling-up of so small a number of troops (156,000) cannot really indicate to the Russians any real determination on our part to stand fast.¹²

What Tyler along with many others in his unit and elsewhere had requested was the reason for mobilization. The Army of course was fully aware of the protests and attempted to address the need for mobilization in a full page special report that appeared in the *New York Times* in December, 1961, titled "Why Me." The report cited the following comments made by President Kennedy during a previous press conference as the major reason for the reserve call-up.

The reason why we called these men is that there is a direct clash of interest in a major area which is Berlin and West Germany. There is also increased tension in Vietnam ...therefore, we believe calling these men up and their willingness to serve increased the chance of maintaining the peace.¹³

Unfortunately, this rationale given by the President had a very hollow ring. While there is little doubt that the immediate need for mobilization began with the closing of the border between East and West Berlin in August 1961, it is also the case that the disturbance at Checkpoint Charlie, which began on October 22nd, was essentially over by the 27th.¹⁴ Equally noteworthy were remarks by Senator J. W. Fulbright, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relation Committee, who said on September 30 that the West was not "without fault" over the Berlin situation...(and that) "We bear a very heavy responsibility for the stupidity of that situation."¹⁵ Then, one month after the episode at Checkpoint Charlie ended, the following statement appeared in the *Times*.

No diplomat or politician in this capital (London, England) can really say why it happened but a measurable easing of relations between the Soviet Union and the Western allies over Berlin is discernible here. Even the most optimistic in this strident twentieth century do not foresee the day when, for one reason or another, relations between the East and West will not be strained. However, the well-informed in Whitehall, that is the people who "read the telegrams" that come to this capital from diplomatic missions and other sources, no longer believe there is a possibility that the world is going to blow up tomorrow. Public opinion (in London), which focused briefly on the Berlin crisis...now is concentrated on a highway murder case, the soccer-league standings and occasionally, the Common Market. While Berlin is spared much thought, some Britons have commented that the Americans have been kicking up a fuss over nothing and don't they look silly with their fall-out shelters.¹⁶

Finally, in January, 1962, the Soviet Army withdrew a dozen tanks “from the heart of East Berlin... triggered by a similar withdrawal of American tanks that took place about 48 hours earlier.”¹⁷ Three months later the *Times* even claimed that Khrushchev was “very cautiously optimistic about reaching an understanding with the West on Berlin ...”¹⁸ and on May 16, 1962, the East German government had begun to release groups of soldiers from active duty.¹⁹ In essence all of these reports certainly suggested that the likelihood of armed conflict over Berlin had begun to dissipate shortly after the reserves had reported for duty, and continued to decline in the months that followed the call for mobilization.

Equally suspect in Kennedy’s comments was the need for a military buildup due to the unfolding situation in Vietnam. Nearly seven months prior to his remarks, the *Times* had reported that Ngo Dinh Diem, president of South Vietnam, was “opposed to using Western forces to fight Asians” and that “there is considerable doubt here of the need for foreign soldiers in a combat role since South Vietnam has a large number of reserves and a big manpower reservoir.”²⁰ Diem not only continued to reiterate this statement as late as May, 1962,²¹ as early as December, 1961, the South Vietnamese regular army numbered around 170,000.²²

Instead of troops what the South Vietnamese government had requested from the United States was advice and economic aid. In terms of economic aid, Vice President Johnson, following his trip to South Vietnam, summarized this requirement in the following words: “Behind the military shield (provided by the South Vietnamese army) the United States had to work with Asian peoples to improve their health, their housing and their standard of living so they will have something to fight for.”²³ In terms of advice, the United States Military Assistance Advisory Group had already sent approximately 685 military advisers to South Vietnam²⁴ among whom were 200 Air Force instructors to train pilots, bombardiers and aircraft maintenance personnel. In addition, 287 South Vietnamese were sent from Vietnam to the United States for military, naval, and air force training.²⁵ Although by February, 1962, the number of American advisers had increased to 4,000, “its mission is primarily advisory—to train the 200,000 man South Vietnam army in the use of modern weapons and techniques...”²⁶ In short, as was the case with Berlin, the argument that mobilization was implemented to demonstrate a willingness to come to the aid of South Vietnam was simply not supported by the needs or the desires of the South Vietnamese government.

In summary, since all of this information was readily available to the public and would have been well known to many of the reservists, it should have come as no surprise that there would be protests and that the protests would persist and become even more pronounced with the passage of time. One of the major problems that led to these further protests was the ineffective utilization of the recalled personnel. The 750th Heavy Truck Transportation Company, for example, when it arrived at Fort Devens, Massachusetts, found only one heavy duty truck was available and so the men “spent the last few months doing nothing.”²⁷ Eventually the company was converted to a Light Truck Transportation Company, for which the men were not trained.

This serious shortcoming was subsequently acknowledged by the Army in several articles that appeared in the *New York Times* in the spring of 1962. In April the *Times* reported that "Government officials have found that a significant number of Army reservists called to active duty last fall were assigned to jobs far removed from what they had been trained to do. A heavy weapons infantryman with twenty-six months in the Marines was mobilized as a medical specialist. Another reservist with more than four years of military training as a construction draftsman was assigned to become a diver."²⁸ The following month the *Times* reported that "in one unit, a high priority helicopter company had only six qualified mechanics and maintenance men to fill eighty-four assignments. In the same unit, two clerk-typists of the Women's Army Corps were filling spaces as a helicopter mechanic and repairman...a heavy weapons infantryman was assigned as a neuropsychiatric specialist, a field medical assistant was assigned as an orthopedic surgeon and an air defense missile unit commander was assigned as a general duty nurse."²⁹ In fact, to emphasize these shortcomings, the *Times* reported a survey conducted by the Army Adjutant General in the late fall of 1961 that revealed only 47% of 5,011 mobilized reservists "had been scheduled for the kind of military specialty jobs they had filled while on active duty."³⁰

In view of many problems of this nature, it is not surprising that the men who were recalled considered their time in service as a complete waste and that their presence in the military was totally unnecessary. The following examples are a few of the articles that also appeared in the *Times* between December, 1961, and April, 1962.

December 5, 1961: A great many profess amazement as to why they were called up. "The Berlin crisis is over," they say...Sp.5 Willard M. Millard, had been disciplined for having written a complaining letter to the Boston Herald...about unrealistic training, of nothing to do, of insufficient equipment, poor leadership and wasted time.³¹

December 7, 1961: A majority of the members of a National Guard company from De Soto, Mo. now on active duty at Fort Knox, Ky., telegraphed the Post-Dispatch today a complaint that their Federal service lacked purpose. "Our moral is nil and we have experienced only lack of purpose," said a telegram signed by 131 of the 171 members of the 196th Ordnance Company. The signers included two master sergeants.³²

January 10, 1962: Nearly 300 California reservists telegraphed their Senators and Congressmen today demanding to know why they should be retained in service if draft quotas were cut.³³

August 5, 1962: Six reserve units from this area (New York City), activated in the Berlin crisis last year, came home yesterday, a bitter group. Feeling that the call-up had been an "unnecessary political move," many of the reservists expressed strong feelings against President Kennedy....³⁴

August 6, 1962: Many men expressed dissatisfaction with the efficiency and ability of their leaders. They cited months spent on “police duty” instead of working at their specialty.³⁵

April 19, 1962: Private Chidester, an automotive mechanic for the 115th Ordnance Company of the Utah National Guard, a Salt Lake City outfit, was to have been court-martialed ...he was charged with writing a letter “containing statements critical of the actions and motives” of the President. He was also charged with circulating the letter among members of his outfit and soliciting their signatures...³⁶

In addition to these matters, the other major concern expressed by the reservists in their protests stemmed from the frustration over not knowing when they would be released. Here too the White House was well aware of the situation. “President Kennedy commiserated today with impatient Reservists who were mobilized in the Berlin crisis last fall and now are clamoring to be released...The Reservists, he said will be release at “the first possible date consistent with our national security.”³⁷ Unfortunately, these ambiguous remarks, no doubt, added to the men’s frustration especially since the Army had announced in January, 1962, that it would “cut its draft call to 8,000 men in February and (to) 6,000 men in March.”³⁸ Presumably if the Army felt that it now had a force of sufficient size to meet its needs, why was it still necessary to keep the reserves in service? Following are some of the ways in which the reserves expressed their frustrations.

March 3, 1962: An undetermined number of enlisted men attached to a New Hampshire National Guard unit at near-by Fort Bragg went on “hunger strike” in an attempt to learn when they would be released from active duty.³⁹

March 4, 1962: Thirty-five members of the Irate Wives Club marched on the main gate of near-by Fort Devens today...and picketed the Army base for two hours in 20-degree weather. They were demanding the release of their reservists husbands from active duty.⁴⁰

March 20, 1962: Major General Harley B. West ordered 15,000 troops at near-by Fort Polk today to stop “we want out” demonstrations. He said that the demonstrators had started reviling President Kennedy and Congress and that he feared a riot.⁴¹

March 24, 1962: The Army announced that it would court martial a leader of “we-want-out” demonstrations...Pfc. Bernis Owen, 23 years old of Seadrift, Texas, was charged with disrespect, conduct prejudicial to good order and conduct bringing discredit to the armed forces in his criticism of a general’s order banning demonstrations.⁴²

After many months of waiting, in late April, 1962, the Army announced that “all Reserve and National Guard units called to active duty last October because of the Berlin crisis would leave for home between August 1 and August 11.”⁴³ Shortly before this announcement appeared, however, the army sponsored a comedy show written and first performed at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, by members of the 310th Military Police Battalion.⁴⁴ The purpose of the show was to satirize and lampoon all of the complaints that had been voiced by the reservists while on duty.

...the policemen joshed and capered about their temporary return to active duty. They chose to make a joke about their current military commitment instead of clamoring for release or threatening retribution. Backed by a six-man band, the Reservists, wondered out loud about such compelling questions as:

Who did this to me?
Did I have to come here when they sent for me?
Was it an I.B.M machine that did it?

They supplied their own answers seconds later to the tune of “McNamara’s Band.”

Oh, his name is McNamara
He’s the reason why we’re here
We wish he’d talk to Kennedy
And shorten up our year.

In view of the complaints by many of the reservists, the show was clearly intended to convey an important message to the public, namely that there were many other reservists who had been recalled during the mobilization period who did not use their time solely to engage in angry protests. Instead these men used their stay in the military in a positive manner as typified by those who wrote and performed the comic verses. In the words of Lieut. Col. Benjamin F. Westervelt, the commanding officer of the 310th Military Police Battalion, these men “manifested a different side of the reserve situation...the side representing the one of loyal American fighting men who are quietly and effectively working toward the goals of national strength and security.”⁴⁵ The show was performed “more than fifty times in Army installations, service clubs and veterans hospitals along the Atlantic seaboard.”⁴⁶

Aftermath

Whether this attempt by the Army to reduce the negative impact of the reservists’ complaints on the public’s perception of the Berlin mobilization was successful or not is, of course, unknown. What is known, however, are the Government’s reactions to the strategic

implications of the complaints. As early as December, 13, 1961, and with the reservists' complaints in mind, the Government began to develop a plan that it felt "would strengthen the reserve forces by putting more men and money into top priority units that would be ready for combat on short notice."

The White House and the Pentagon have been shaken by the complaints that have arisen and some of the weaknesses that have been revealed in the recent mobilization of 119,500 citizen soldiers to augment the Regular Army during the Berlin crisis...Prior to the Berlin crisis the Department of Defense opposed an increase in the size of the Regular Army and focused instead on ways and means of increasing National Guard and Reserve readiness...Under plans then being studied some National Guard divisions were to be organized, trained and equipped for possible deployment within three weeks of Federal activation. Since the (Berlin) mobilization these plans have been, if not shelved, at least de-emphasized...(Instead) A decision has been made to increase the Regular Army from fourteen to sixteen divisions...(and) in the next few months, both the Pentagon and Congress are expected to study the role of the guard and the reserve in a long-continued "cold war." Thinking in the Defense Department is that expenditures for reserve forces are too high, that the existing troop basis is too large and must be reduced and that some realistic means must be found of maintaining at least some (reserve and National Guard) priority units at a far higher state of readiness than before.⁴⁷

In essence, the government acknowledged that there were serious deficiencies in the National Guard and the Army Reserve that needed to be rectified to ensure that the men who would be recalled in the future would be fully trained and equipped to handle the tasks they would be assigned when their units were mobilized. To accomplish this goal the Army Ready Reserves needed to be cut from 700,000 to 642,000 men which led to considerable opposition in the House⁴⁸ and therefore was not fully implemented until December, 1962.⁴⁹ This meant, of course, that many Army reserve outfits remained in a state of flux for many months after the Berlin mobilization crisis had ended.

The government also elected to re-evaluate the circumstances under which the president would be given the authority to mobilize the reserves.

The secretary (of Defense) testified before Congress on this subject several times last spring. Discussing the Berlin crisis call-up, he repeated the following statement before major committees: "This action has served its purpose well...But improvisation is not a substitute for a sound long-term policy. It is not a practical policy to rely on reserve forces to meet the repeated crises which inevitably lie ahead...In a similar vein, Deputy Defense Secretary Roswell L. Gilpatric indicated, following the Berlin call-up, that another such mobilization would be ordered only for "larger-scale crises than those encountered (in Berlin during) this cold war period... The Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara believes that as a rule, the reserves should be relied upon only when armed conflict is imminent."⁵⁰

The United States did enter just such a period that fall with the arming of Cuba by the Soviet Union. The following statement is from the text of a message delivered by President Kennedy on September 4, 1962.

Information has reached this Government in the last four days from a variety of sources which establishes without doubt that the Soviets have provided the Cuban Government with a number of anti-aircraft defensive missiles...The number of Soviet military technicians now known to be in Cuba or en route—approximately 3,500—is consistent with assistance in setting up and learning to use this equipment.⁵¹

Five days later Kennedy asked Congress for stand-by authority, but not full authority, to call up 150,000 reserves in the event of an attack.⁵² On September 10, the Senate granted unanimous approval to his request⁵³ and on September 24, the House also approved the President's request.⁵⁴

The situation in Cuba further escalated on October 14 when it was discovered that the missile sites in Cuba did not contain anti-aircraft defensive missiles but instead housed offensive missiles with nuclear war heads aimed at the United States.⁵⁵ Although Congress had granted the President stand-by authority to recall as many as 150,000 reserves, in view of the lessons learned from the third Berlin crisis, and in keeping with McNamara's remarks, this time the call-up was far more limited than before in that only 14,214 men were mobilized and the recall was confined to four troop-carrier squadrons of the Air Force Reserves that were to be used only "to bolster operations in the crisis over Cuba."⁵⁶ Thus, it would seem that the United States now clearly wished to avoid the situation that had resulted from the previous reserve call-up.

Postscript

Before leaving this topic it may be worth asking if the Cuban Missile Crisis was connected to several of the events mentioned above that followed the third Berlin crisis. To understand this possible connection, however, it is necessary to briefly review the timing in the unfolding of the Cuban Missile Crisis. In November, 1960, Castro first raised the possibility of "extending the Soviet nuclear umbrella to Cuba" as a means of offering protection against any attacks from the United States. At the same time "Che Guevara (also) probed Khrushchev about the possibility of placing Soviet missiles in Cuba."⁵⁷ The Kremlin did not respond to either request. Castro again broached this matter to the Soviets in August, 1961, which was after the Bay of Pigs invasion. It wasn't until April, 1962, however, that Khrushchev began to give serious consideration to this possibility,⁵⁸ and it was on May 20, 1962, that Khrushchev formally unveiled the Cuban missile plan.⁵⁹ The question, of course, is why did Khrushchev wait roughly two years before he acted on Castro's initial suggestion?

While it could be that prior to 1962, Khrushchev avoided the subject because he was preoccupied with the events that had been developing during the initial stages of the second

Berlin crisis. It could also be, however, that the timing of events which transpired during the final stages of the third Berlin crisis may have suggested to Khrushchev that now was an appropriate time to give serious thought to Castro's suggestion. As summarized above, it was during this period (December 1961 through December, 1962) that the reserve units were in a state of flux which meant that the reserves were not likely to be recalled again. It was also during the mid-to-latter part of this period (the spring of 1962 through the fall of 1962) that both McNamara and the Pentagon stated they were reluctant to recall the reserves unless armed conflict was truly imminent. In short, these two pieces of information, when considered together, may have been extremely important in Khrushchev's thinking because they may have signaled a relatively safe period (July through September, 1962) for the delivery of the missiles as long as their delivery could be kept secret (for a detailed account of the efforts made by the Soviets to ensure secrecy see footnote number 60).

Finally, it may also be worth asking if both the Cuban Missile Crisis and the third Berlin crisis could have been entirely avoided by focusing on the cause of second Berlin crisis. As stated above the Soviet Union was extremely concerned over the hemorrhaging of refugees from East Berlin to West Berlin. The official US Senate figures for the first days in July, 1961, and in the weeks that followed, showed that 4,979 refugees had arrived in West Berlin from East Berlin⁶¹ and

more than twenty thousand people fled from East Germany to West Germany. They were mostly men and most were young, half of them under twenty-five. Many were professionals: engineers, teachers, physicians, technicians.⁶²

On July 25, 1961, which was prior to the construction of the wall, Kennedy gave a live broadcast in which he outlined his Berlin policy. That night Khrushchev was in a meeting with John J. McCloy, former U.S. High Commissioner in Berlin who was serving as Kennedy's chief disarmament adviser. On July 29, McCloy sent Kennedy an "Eyes Only" cable in which he outlined Khrushchev's reaction to Kennedy's speech. The wording in the cable conveyed the following message.

(Khrushchev was) really mad on Thursday after digesting (the) President's speech. (He) used rough war-like language (and stated that war was) bound to be thermonuclear and though you and we may survive, all your European allies will be completely destroyed.⁶³

Needless to say, Kennedy was greatly alarmed at the message and on July 31 McCloy was called back to Washington to meet with Kennedy. During the meeting McCloy reviewed his conversation with Khrushchev and emphasized the number of times the Soviet leader brought up the flow of refugees out of East Germany. "Khrushchev's message, as McCloy delivered it, was that unless the exodus was stopped it could lead to war...Khrushchev's point—McCloy reported to Kennedy—was that stopping the refugee exodus was as important to the United States as it was to the Soviet Union."⁶⁴

On August 10, Khrushchev extended his threat of thermonuclear war to all of Europe and on that day a reporter asked Kennedy if he could give his assessment of the danger and whether “his Government has any policy regarding the encouragement or discouragement of East German refugees moving West?” Kennedy replied that “The United States Government does not attempt to encourage or discourage the movement of refugees and I know of no plans to do so.” One week later, while walking back to the White House, he was overheard reiterating the same comment while at same time acknowledging the gravity of the situation that the United States as well as the rest of the world was facing.

This is unbearable for Khrushchev, East Germany is hemorrhaging to death. The entire East bloc is in danger. He has to do something to stop this. Perhaps a wall. And there’s not a damn thing we can do about it.⁶⁵

In essence, Kennedy was clearly aware of the significance of Khrushchev’s words, as well as the true cause of the second Berlin crisis: the massive exodus of refugees from the East. His comments regarding the role that the United States played in this exodus, however, were false for two reasons, and he should have known that to be the case. First, there was Radio Free Europe in Munich, West Germany, which was largely underwritten by the United States and was enthusiastically supported by his brother, Robert Kennedy.⁶⁶ Founded in 1949 the station served as an anti-communist news source with sufficient power to reach most of the Soviet Bloc countries. It was estimated to have about six million listeners.⁶⁷ In addition to broadcasting news that depicted the advantages of living in the West, “one major goal of their program was to encourage dissent, to bring about, if possible, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.”⁶⁸

Furthermore, between 1951 and 1956 Radio Free Europe also launched over 350,000 balloons. “Large polyethylene versions rose to altitudes of 30,000 to 40,000 feet carrying heavy loads of leaflets. At a predetermined altitude, the balloons exploded, dropping their leaflets over a wide area.”⁶⁹ The balloons carried not only leaflets, but posters, and books such as *Animal Farm* which were highly critical of the Soviet system, along with other printed matter that included messages of support and encouragement to those who were suffering under communist oppression and were designed to promote the migration of people from the East to the West.

Second, and also beginning in 1949, the United States had established reception centers in West Berlin to handle those who wished to leave the East and settle in the West. When the refugees arrived in West Berlin they underwent a screening process that started with a medical examination and police interview, followed by a personal hearing that dealt with the individual’s work history, education, and reasons for leaving East Germany. The hearings

generally lasted twenty to thirty minutes, though they could be longer if additional expert testimony was required to determine a refugee’s credibility. Following the hearings, the committee might take several days to determine whether or not a refugee would be recognized.⁷⁰

After the successful completion of this process, the refugees were transported by bus or airplane to further centers in West Germany to obtain employment and housing. The existence of these centers, by themselves, was responsible for generating a continuous flow of people across the border between 1949 and 1961. The rules under which the centers initially operated, however, stated that

recognition would be granted (only) to those who fled East Germany on political grounds, especially on account of danger to life and limb ...the intention of this language was clear: to exclude those refugees intending to migrate for economic reasons, whether to seek higher-paying employment or enjoy a better standard of living.”⁷¹

Using this criterion between 1949 and 1953, of the nearly 300,000 arrivals at the centers, 42% had their applications denied. After 1953, though, the criteria became more lenient and the number of rejections declined substantially. In fact, “during the late 1950s, acceptance rates neared 99 percent”⁷² which would have meant that most of the refugees who left in the late 1950s were those who fled the East for material gain and not for political reasons.

In short, between the broadcasts, the balloon-delivered materials, and the existence of the refugee centers, the United States and its allies had strongly encouraged people to leave East Germany as well as East Berlin and live under a Western style political system. Because these activities were the principal cause of the massive refugee exodus that had so angered Khrushchev, could Kennedy have done anything to stop these activities? Despite the fact that the issue raised by Khrushchev, in the fall of 1961 and again in the fall of 1962, over the refugee exodus nearly brought the world to the brink of total destruction through the advent of nuclear war, in view of the exceedingly strong anti-communist sentiment held in the West at the time, any direct attempt to stop the operation of either Radio Free Europe or the refugee centers would have garnered little or no support in the United States.

On the other hand, if Kennedy had attempted, quietly, but with Khrushchev’s knowledge, to curtail the operation of both agencies, such a move might have served as an indication that the West was truly willing to cooperate with the Soviets in order to prevent a nuclear war. How this might have been accomplished is suggested by the method Kennedy used to end the Cuban Missile Crisis.

On October 26, 1962, a letter from Khrushchev was received by the White House that contained the following words:

We will remove our missiles from Cuba, (if) you will remove yours from Turkey...The Soviet Union will pledge not to invade or interfere with the internal affairs of Turkey; the U.S. to make the same pledge regarding Cuba.⁷³

Even though Kennedy’s initial reaction to this request was anger, along with many members of his staff he also had previously considered just such a move. “On several occasions over the period of the past eighteen months, the President had asked the State Department to reach an

agreement with Turkey for the withdrawal of Jupiter missiles in that country. They were clearly obsolete, and our Polaris submarines in the Mediterranean would give Turkey far greater protection.”⁷⁴ Obviously Kennedy did not wish to order the withdrawal of the missiles from Turkey “under threat from the Soviet Union.”⁷⁵ To have done so would have been strongly opposed by Kennedy’s military advisers, and would also have suggested to the public that the White House was acting out of weakness, which Kennedy could not tolerate.

For these reasons Kennedy’s response to Khrushchev’s letter of October 26 contained no mention of the missiles in Turkey. Instead it only addressed two other provisions that also appeared in his letter.

As I read your letter, the key elements of your proposals—which seem generally acceptable as I understand them—are as follows:

1. You would agree to remove these weapons systems from Cuba under appropriate United Nations observation and supervision; and undertake, with suitable safeguards, to halt the further introduction of such weapons systems into Cuba.
2. We, on our part, would agree—upon the establishment of adequate arrangements through the United Nations to ensure the carrying out and continuation of these commitments –(a) to remove promptly the quarantine measures (that blocked the Soviet ships from entering Cuban waters), and (b) to give assurances against an invasion of Cuba. I am confident that other nations of the Western Hemisphere would be prepared to do likewise.⁷⁶

A more subtle approach was then employed by the Kennedy administration to accomplish the need to have the missiles in Turkey removed. The same day that Kennedy’s letter was sent to Khrushchev, Robert Kennedy was instructed to meet with the Russian Ambassador to the United States, Anatoli Dobrynin.

He (Dobrynin) asked me what offer the United States was making, and I told him of the letter that President Kennedy had just transmitted to Khrushchev. He (then) raised the question of our removing the missiles from Turkey. I said that there could be no quid pro quo or any arrangement made under this kind of threat or pressure....However, I said, President Kennedy had been anxious to remove those missiles...for a long period of time...and it was our judgement that, within a short time after this crisis was over, those missiles would be gone.⁷⁷

Needless to say, Dobrynin conveyed this indirect message in secret to Khrushchev, which was the final part of the negotiations that led to the withdrawal of the missiles from Turkey and the end of the Cuban Missile Crisis. The last of the missiles in Turkey were subsequently disassembled and removed under the auspices of the Secretary General of the United Nations which permitted Kennedy to say, when asked by a reporter in January, 1963, that “the removal of the Jupiter (missiles) was routine modernization” and had nothing to do with ending the Cuban Missile Crisis.⁷⁸

In essence, with this approach to ending the Cuban Missile Crisis in mind, and with Khrushchev's extreme concern over the refugee exodus from the East to the West, there may have been several ways in which the Cuban Missile Crisis could have been entirely avoided. First, because Radio Free Europe received most if not all of its operating funds through congressional appropriations,⁷⁹ as President of the United States, Kennedy could have exerted pressure on the station to alter the nature of its broadcasts through the Administration's control of the station's funds. Second, with the cooperation of the other western occupying powers in Berlin, the refugee centers could have been asked to return to the 1949-1953 criteria for granting refugee status only to those who left East Germany for political reasons and not for material gain thereby substantially reducing the refugee flow. Needless to say, if both methods had been carried out, but not publicized at the time in the United States, this would have sent a strong message to Khrushchev that the West was willing to cooperate with the East which, in turn, might have caused Khrushchev to reevaluate his need to build the Berlin wall and to supply Castro with missiles and thereby spared the United States from all of the turmoil that resulted from both the third Berlin crisis as well as the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Robert Kennedy, shortly before his death, summarized his brother's approach to resolving the Cuban Missile Crisis in the following words.

The final lesson of the Cuban missile crisis is the importance of placing ourselves in the other country's shoes. During the crisis, President Kennedy spent more time trying to determine the effect of a particular course of action on Khrushchev or the Russians than on any other phase of what he was doing. What guided all his deliberations was an effort not to disgrace Khrushchev, not to humiliate the Soviet Union, not to have them feel they would have to escalate their response because their national security or national interests so committed them.⁸⁰

While there is little question that these words by Robert Kennedy were clearly deserving because of his brother's handling of the naval blockade that ended the shipment of missiles to Cuba, they would have been even more deserving if John Kennedy had also tried to avoid both the Cuban Missile Crisis and the third Berlin crisis by implementing something akin to the forgoing suggestions. In Reeves' (1993) assessment of Kennedy's years in power, Kennedy was quite aware that he

had initiated and was presiding over one of the great military build-ups of all time. He knew it was not a direct response to a real Soviet threat; it was the result of runaway American politics, exaggerated threats of communism, misunderstood intelligence, inflated campaign rhetoric, a few lies here and there, and his own determination never to be vulnerable to "soft on Communism" charges that Republicans regularly used to discredit Democrats.⁸¹

Given his awareness of all these matters, it could be that Kennedy chose to avoid dealing even indirectly with Khrushchev's concerns because he was fearful of the impact that charges of

“soft on Communism” might have had on his political future, a thought that was frequently uppermost in his mind throughout his tenure in office.⁸²

End Notes

¹Davidson, W. Phillips (1980). *The Berlin Blockade*. New York, NY: Arno Press, p. 261.

²Davidson, W. Phillips (1980). *The Berlin Blockade*. New York, NY: Arno Press, p. 263.

³Wyden, Peter (1989). *Wall: The Inside Story of Divided Berlin*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, p. 46.

⁴Wyden, Peter (1989). *Wall: The Inside Story of Divided Berlin*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, p. 200.

⁵Kemp, Frederick (2011). *Berlin 1961*. New York, NY: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, p. 4.

⁶*New York Times*, July, 26, 1961, p. 1; July 27, 1961, p. 8.

⁷*New York Times*, August 1, 1961, p. 1.

⁸*New York Times*, October 1, 1961, p. 20.

⁹*New York Times*, August 27, 1961, p. 42.

¹⁰*New York Times*, October 25, 1961, p. 18.

¹¹*Raleigh News and Observer*, December 2, 1961.

¹²*New York Times*, December 3, 1961, p. 26.

¹³*New York Times*, December 20, 1961, p. 22.

¹⁴Kemp, Frederick (2011). *Berlin 1961*. New York, NY: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, p.448-481.

¹⁵*New York Times*, October 1, 1961, p. 5.

¹⁶*New York Times*, December 1, 1961, p. 8.

¹⁷*New York Times*, January 19, 1962, p. 1.

¹⁸*New York Times*, April 21, 1962, p. 1.

- ¹⁹*New York Times*, May 16, 1962, p. ?
- ²⁰*New York Times*, May 12, 1961, p. 2.
- ²¹*New York Times*, May 16, 1962, p. 14.
- ²²*New York Times*, December 22, 1961, p. 7.
- ²³*New York Times*, June 10, 1961, p. 3.
- ²⁴*New York Times*, October 22, 1961, p. E5.
- ²⁵*New York Times*, November 10, 1961, p. 14.
- ²⁶*New York Times*, February 18, 1962, p. E1.
- ²⁷*New York Times*, August 5, 1962, p. 30.
- ²⁸*New York Times*, April 8, 1962, p. 51.
- ²⁹*New York Times*, May 10, 1962, p. 18.
- ³⁰*New York Times*, April 8, 1962, p. 51
- ³¹*New York Times*, December 5, 1961, p. 21.
- ³²*New York Times*, December 7, 1961, p. 15.
- ³³*New York Times*, January 10, 1962, p. 11.
- ³⁴*New York Times*, August 5, 1962.
- ³⁵*New York Times*, August 6, 1962.
- ³⁶*New York Times*, April 19, 1962, p. 1.
- ³⁷*New York Times*, March 22, 1962, p. 16.
- ³⁸*New York Times*, January 5, 1962, p. 1.
- ³⁹*New York Times*, March 4, 1962, p. 47.
- ⁴⁰*New York Times*, March 4, 1962, p. 47.

⁴¹*New York Times*, March 20, 1962, p. 26.

⁴²*New York Times*, March 24, 1962, p. 7.

⁴³*New York Times*, April 28, 1962, p. 10.

⁴⁴*New York Times*, April 29, 1962, p. 238

⁴⁵*New York Times*, April 21, 1962, p. 12.

⁴⁶*New York Times*, April 21, 1962, p. 12.

⁴⁷*New York Times*, December 14, 1961, p. 1.

⁴⁸*New York Times*, May 17, 1962, p. 10.

⁴⁹*New York Times*, December 5, 1962, p. 26.

⁵⁰*New York Times*, September 8, 1962, p. 2.

⁵¹*New York Times*, September 5, 1962, p. 2.

⁵²*New York Times*, September 9, 1962, p. 189.

⁵³*New York Times*, September 11, 1962, p. 1.

⁵⁴*New York Times*, September 25, 1962, p. 1

⁵⁵Walton, Richard J. (1976). *Cold War and Counter-Revolution*. New York, NY: Penguin Books, Chapter 7.

⁵⁶*New York Times*, October 28, 1962, p. 1.

⁵⁷Colman, Jonathan (2016). *The Cuban Missile Crisis*. Edinburgh: University Press, p. 43.

⁵⁸Munton, Don and Welch, David A. (2012). *The Cuban Missile Crisis: A Concise History*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, p. 27.

⁵⁹George, Alice L. (2013). *The Cuban Missile Crisis: The Threshold of Nuclear War*. New York, NY: Routledge, p 34.

⁶⁰Through proper planning there were at least two ways in which secrecy could be maintained.

First, according to George (2013, p. 35), "...Soviet military leaders assured Khrushchev that there was little chance of American discovery before the installations were complete. The missiles, they implausibly told him, could be disguised as coconut palms, or they would be hidden within natural camouflage provided by Cuba's trees." The second way of maintaining secrecy involved the method of their delivery.

Khrushchev told Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, who was one of the few knowledgeable Soviet officials, that 'We must deliver and deploy the missiles quietly, taking all precautions so as to present the Americans with an accomplished fact.' It was imperative to see that no information is leaked to the press before the end of the campaign for the American elections on November 4 if we are to avoid aggravating the situation there.

(Only) the most senior officers brought into the project learned that Cuba was involved, and only a few were given details of what was planned. No secretaries were used to prepare memoranda. A colonel hand-wrote the proposal that was later adopted by the Defense Council. This way the initial decision grew into a detailed plan, and, still in handwritten form, it received Malinovsky's formal approval on 4 July and that of Khrushchev three days later.

The missiles were unloaded from the ships only at night, under total blackout on the ships and in the ports. While the missiles were being unloaded, all external approaches to the ports were guarded by a specially assigned mountain rifle squadron consisting of 300 men (Colman, 2016, p. 54-56).

Despite these attempts to maintain secrecy, however, the missiles were discovered on October 14, 1962, when an Air Force U-2 spy plane obtained clear photographic evidence of medium-range and intermediate-range ballistic missile facilities. The crisis did not end though until the last of the missiles were withdrawn from Cuba on October 28.

The (Soviet) troops involved in the Cuban expedition were told they were going somewhere cold. To strengthen the deception, many units were equipped with winter gear. The deception was so thorough that even senior Soviet officers sent to Cuba did not know where they were going until they reached their destination.

⁶¹Reeves, Richard (1993). *President Kennedy: Profile of Power*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, p. 193.

⁶²Reeves, Richard (1993). *President Kennedy: Profile of Power*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, p. 185.

- ⁶³Reeves, Richard (1993). *President Kennedy: Profile of Power*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, p. 203.
- ⁶⁴Reeves, Richard (1993). *President Kennedy: Profile of Power*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, p. 205.
- ⁶⁵Reeves, Richard (1993). *President Kennedy: Profile of Power*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, p. 208.
- ⁶⁶Puddington, Arch (2000). *Broadcasting Freedom*. ?, The University Press of Kentucky.
- ⁶⁷*New York Times*, November 5, 1961.
- ⁶⁸Street, Nancy L. and Matelski, Marilyn J. (1997). *Messages from the Underground*. Westport, CN: Praeger Press, p. 43.
- ⁶⁹Mickelson, Sig (1983). *America's Other Voice*. Westport, CN: Praeger Press.
- ⁷⁰Limbach, Eric H. (2011). *Unsettled Germans: The Reception and Resettlement of East German Refugees in West Germany, 1949-1961*. Doctoral Dissertation submitted to Michigan State University, p. 71.
- ⁷¹Limbach, Eric H. (2011). *Unsettled Germans: The Reception and Resettlement of East German Refugees in West Germany, 1949-1961*. Doctoral Dissertation submitted to Michigan State University, p. 50.
- ⁷²Limbach, Eric H. (2011). *Unsettled Germans: The Reception and Resettlement of East German Refugees in West Germany, 1949-1961*. Doctoral Dissertation submitted to Michigan State University, p. 66.
- ⁷³Kennedy, Robert F. (1969). *Thirteen Days*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, p. 94.
- ⁷⁴Kennedy, Robert F. (1969). *Thirteen Days*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, p. 95.
- ⁷⁵Kennedy, Robert F. (1969). *Thirteen Days*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, p. 94.
- ⁷⁶Kennedy, Robert F. (1969). *Thirteen Days*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, p. 103.
- ⁷⁷Kennedy, Robert F. (1969). *Thirteen Days*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, p. 108-109. (Note: for a more complete discussion of the events that unfolded during this critical period in the crisis see Colman, J. (2016). *The Cuban Missile Crisis: Origins, Course and Aftermath*. Edinburgh: The Edinburgh University Press.
- ⁷⁸Reeves, Richard (1993). *President Kennedy: Profile of Power*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, p. 455.

⁷⁹Sosin, Gene, (1999). *Sparks of Liberty*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, p. 2).

⁸⁰Kennedy, Robert F. (1969). *Thirteen Days*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company. P. 124.

⁸¹Reeves, Richard (1993). *President Kennedy: Profile of Power*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, p. 230.

⁸²Reeves, Richard (1993). *President Kennedy: Profile of Power*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

