
WALL

THE INSIDE STORY
OF DIVIDED BERLIN

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THE KREMLIN SIGNS ON: "BUT NOT ONE MILLIMETER FARTHER"

**Moscow,
Saturday, August 5, 1961**

The ranking leadership of the Warsaw Pact satellites, assembling for a climactic midafternoon session in the Kremlin, watched closely how Premier Nikita Khrushchev addressed Walter Ulbricht, the DDR boss. Khrushchev's words of greeting were pleasant, but the cordial air evaporated as the discussion of the East German refugees progressed.

"Thanks, Comrade Khrushchev," Ulbricht finally said. "Without your help we could not solve this terrible problem."

"Yes, I agree," Khrushchev responded, "but not one millimeter farther."

According to a conference participant who observed this chilling encounter,* Ulbricht paled. The DDR dictator had been lobbying

* The eyewitness was Colonel Jan Sejna (pronounced Shay-na), the thirty-four-year-old chief of staff to the Czech Minister of Defense, a political post. When the Soviets took over Czechoslovakia in 1968, Sejna, by then a major general, used his diplomatic passport to cross the Czech-Austrian border in his Mercedes. He requested asylum at the American consulate in Trieste and was flown to the United States. His CIA debriefings took "a long, long time." The short, square-faced general told me with a thin smile when I interviewed him in an Arlington, Virginia, hotel lobby in 1986. Our meeting was arranged by a retired CIA officer.

the Soviets to assume jurisdiction over the westward Allied air corridors from Berlin. He also wanted to seize control of the city's Western sectors. Khrushchev had evidently decided against both of these recommendations to solve the "terrible problem" of the refugees. And he enjoyed announcing his veto even before the ultrasecret session of the more than forty Soviet bloc leaders got under way. It began to look as if five months of Ulbricht's frantic shuttle diplomacy between East Berlin and Moscow had been fruitless.

His first pitch, delivered at a similar Kremlin conference on the morning of March 29, had drawn a negative reception.* Ulbricht had then proposed erecting barbed wire and increasing the border patrols along the sector frontier without mentioning his plan to reinforce this barrier later with a concrete wall. The Hungarians complained that visible defensive fortifications would set off unfavorable propaganda. The Romanians worried that it might spark war. Khrushchev thought it was at best premature; if they were to move now, Kennedy might cancel the June summit meeting in Vienna, where the Soviet Premier wanted to size up the President.

Nobody minded giving Ulbricht a hard time, and that included Khrushchev himself. When the Soviet leader had been a commissar with Soviet troops at Stalingrad, he had met this dour German comrade during the battles of 1942 and had not been impressed with Ulbricht's abortive propaganda efforts to talk Nazi troops into surrendering. Over the years since, the Warsaw Pact allies had not overcome their traditional distrust for their German compatriots. Among themselves, the Slavs still muttered that all Germans were "fascists" at heart. And the arrogant Ulbricht made himself particularly unpopular by missing no opportunity to point out that the DDR was Communism's show window to the West and therefore deserved priority treatment in the constant competition for support from Mother Russia.

By evening, Ulbricht had salvaged only one concession from his

I never learned Sejna's address or phone number or the name he uses in public, nor the Washington organization where he was said to be doing "research."

* Washington had been alerted to Moscow's concern. Two weeks earlier, Llewellyn Thompson, the American Ambassador to Moscow and a veteran Kremlinologist, had sent home a prescient cable, beginning, "If we expect Soviets to leave Berlin problem as is, then we must at least expect East Germans to seal off sector boundary in order to stop what they must consider intolerable continuation refugee flow through Berlin."

reluctant friends: he was authorized to "prepare everything" to proceed for a possible green light at some subsequent stage.

As soon as he arrived back home, Ulbricht instructed Erich Honecker to assemble the necessary organization, materials, and men. Although it would be one of the more ambitious construction jobs of modern times, the preparations had to be cloaked in absolute secrecy. Honecker was delighted. With his eye on replacing the aging Ulbricht, the former youth leader had already moved on to new responsibilities as secretary for national security. If he could show his peers—and history—that he knew how to solve the "terrible problem" of the refugees, his future would be secure.

Ulbricht made his next sales trip to Moscow on Monday, July 31. The temperature outside was 92 degrees. Within the Kremlin, the atmosphere was cool. The Western Allies were flying hundreds of DDR refugees to the West from Berlin every day. Ulbricht reported; such nose-thumbing at the sovereignty of the DDR was intolerable to him. Khrushchev and his advisers nevertheless did not wish to authorize Soviet fighters to enforce the proposed closure of Western air access lanes; the West might consider this an act of war.

Well, Ulbricht asked, what about a wall to close off the sector border? Khrushchev and the other conferees were still dubious. They agreed only to resume discussion of the "terrible problem" at the upcoming Warsaw Pact leadership meeting scheduled, at Ulbricht's request, for Thursday, August 3.

Backed up by his deputy and his two principal foreign affairs advisers, Ulbricht resumed his lobbying when the allies met again that Thursday. The refugee exodus, he reported, was disrupting the DDR economy; unless it was stopped "here and now," he would be unable to meet commitments to deliver raw materials and manufactured goods to his friends in the East. And his situation was explosive. Any day might see new worker uprisings; this time they might be harder to quell than in 1953.

Reluctantly, Khrushchev and his partners agreed to have Ulbricht put up a wall if, in time for the final session, on Saturday, August 5, the East Germans could make a convincing case on two counts: Could the DDR forces keep the lid on the restless workers of East Berlin? And could the DDR withstand an economic blockade if the West Germans decided to stop interzonal trade?

Those requirements meant homework for Ulbricht and his

team. Having rushed back to Berlin by the early morning hours of Friday, August 4, Ulbricht summoned his six key ministers to his villa in the leadership's golden ghetto in suburban Wandlitz. Ulbricht's deputy, Willi Stoph,* and Honecker would work up the military requirements. The others would attend to the economic questions. They all worked through the night and at 10:30 A.M., joined by three more ministers, they convened in the Ministry of Public Health near Unter den Linden. According to the public cover story, they were considering how to protect the DDR against a reported "polio epidemic" in West Germany. The East Berlin media had been spreading this fake scare story to discourage refugees.

The economic report caused Ulbricht's men no concern. The military appraisal did. According to the review prepared by Willi Stoph and Erich Honecker, the available 8,200 *Vopos* and 3,700 "garrisoned police" could be augmented by 12,000 factory militiamen and 4,500 elite troops of the guard regiment controlled by the State Security (*Stasi*). But the conferees estimated that an additional 40,000 men might be needed to abort any repetition of the 1953 riots. The 10,000 regular troops with their 150 tanks stationed in the Berlin area would have to be reinforced by militiamen from politically reliable Saxony, and Honecker volunteered the services of his former charges, youth units of the Free German Youth, the FDJ, for border patrol duty.

Honecker's meticulous groundwork to assemble the physical requirements looked good to the leaders, especially since the movement of materials would ultimately be massive and total secrecy could not be broken. Barbed wire, some forty kilometers in length, had already been transported from near the West German border to the large military base at Basdorf. The camp was close to Route 109; the fencing could easily be trucked into East Berlin at the last moment. Concrete slabs and posts had been stored at scattered building sites around the city and could be readily transported to the border for the second phase of the operation.

The question of the exact timing, subject to Khrushchev's final okay, was last on the agenda. D day could not be a busy weekday, when the more than 40,000 detested *Grenzgänger* (border crossers) traveled from the East to their jobs in the West, and 13,000 West Berliners crossed over to jobs in the East. Interference with such

* Still a member of the Politburo in 1988.

formidable movements could lead to incidents. A weekend would be ideal, especially in midsummer. The locals would be relaxing. So would the Western authorities. The coming weekend, thirty-seven hours away, was too close to be manageable. They would try for the following one, August 12 to 13.

Back in Moscow in the very early morning of Saturday, August 5, Ulbricht had to cool his heels until midafternoon while Khrushchev disposed of other business. If the German retained some lingering hope that his Soviet protectors would let him march into West Berlin, Khrushchev's greeting ("Not one millimeter farther") snuffed it with finality.

In yet another of his presentations, this time quite emotional, Ulbricht, salesman and supplicant, again appealed to his comrades to let him at the very least seal the border at once. The Americans would do nothing. As evidence, the Goatee cited the July 30 TV pronouncement by Senator Fulbright of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the East had the right to close the border.

How much further could the Americans go toward giving Ulbricht virtual permission to go ahead?

Khrushchev rose to agree. He told the Communist leaders that he had been impressed at Vienna by Kennedy's desire to be an independent executive and not to let himself be manipulated by military or industry interests; JFK wanted to be a man of peace. Khrushchev said he had played "cat and mouse" with the President in Vienna. The satellite leaders smiled in unison. There could be no question about the identity of the cat; a Kennedy mouse could hardly threaten a stealthy Soviet feline.

Ulbricht's disclosure that he planned to put up a solid wall, not merely a barbed-wire fence, triggered unease among some of the satellite leaders. Khrushchev offered a compromise. The border would initially be sealed by barbed wire. If, as expected, the West did not respond with force, a wall could replace it.* Under no

* Many years afterward, reports were published claiming that sometime prior to the events of August 13, probably after the August 5 Kremlin meeting, the Soviets and the East Germans agreed that the DDR forces were to withdraw 100 meters if the West were to resist the installation of barbed wire. If the West were to push farther, Ulbricht's men were to retreat another 100 meters. If the Allies moved still farther east, the DDR troops were to retreat for the third and last time and call in the Soviet forces that would stand by around the periphery of the city. Communist participants told me that there was no such agreement.

According to his memoirs, Khrushchev was deeply involved in the detailed planning. He remembered asking his East Berlin Ambassador to send him a map

circumstances were Ulbricht's men to venture into Western territory. Soviet officers would be at hand to watch them.*

Attending the conference that day was the bullet-headed, be-medaled Marshal Ivan S. (the Tank) Koniev, a World War II hero who hated Germans and had marched into Berlin in 1945. Khrushchev eventually explained why he had recalled the gruff and tough warrior at the age of sixty-three to take over once again as Commander in Chief of Soviet forces in Germany. The appointment was meant to impress friend and foe, and it did.† But the buttons that would require pushing on Sunday, August 13, were in the hands of little Erich Honecker.

Having been so lengthily belabored by Ulbricht about the East's inability to compete with the dazzle and affluence of West Berlin, Khrushchev decided to see for himself just what was attracting so many DDR citizens across the border and into the arms of capitalism. Chaperoned by the commandant of Berlin's Soviet occupation troops, he traveled West incognito.

"I never got out of the car," he recalled, "but I made a full tour and saw what the city was like." And while he did not record his impressions, he could hardly have failed to register the contrast of the two Berlins as an ideological marketplace.

of West Berlin; deciding to put up "antitank barriers and barricades"; and using DDR troops out in front, placing his own men "a few meters" to the rear in order "to give the impression that the whole thing was being carried out by the Germans." He remembered setting August 13 as D day and laughing at the date: "We kidded among ourselves that in the West the thirteenth is supposed to be an unlucky day. I joked that for us and for the whole socialist camp it would be a very lucky day indeed."

* The Russians did this quite literally. Once the fencing was put up, CIA officers saw Soviet officers actually keeping binoculars trained on the DDR forces from vantage points slightly farther east—a case of watchers watching watchers.

† Koniev's recall was psychological warfare. In his 1970 memoirs Khrushchev called it "just an 'administrative' appointment to demonstrate to the West that we regarded the situation as seriously as they did. Our regular commander in Berlin, who was junior in rank to Koniev, remained in charge while Koniev reported to us in Moscow." The Soviet Premier added: "The fact that Koniev afterwards spent most of his time in Moscow proves we weren't expecting the confrontation to escalate into a full-scale military conflict." Initially, Khrushchev had offered the job to the even more honored Marshal Georgi Zhukov, whom Koniev had beaten to Berlin by one day, back in 1945. Zhukov turned down the 1961 propaganda chore, pleading advanced age.