

BLOOMSBURY

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WAG THE DOG

ON 20 JANUARY 1961, in front of a host of invited dignitaries and 20,000 citizens willing to brave (in the words of the *New York Times*) 'a Siberian wind knifing down Pennsylvania Avenue', bringing outdoor temperatures of minus seven degrees centigrade, John Fitzgerald Kennedy was sworn in as thirty-fifth president of the United States.

He gave a stirring inauguration speech that raised hopes of a new era in American politics. It made him a liberal icon. This was to a great extent justified, though much of the change that the Kennedy White House seemed to represent was more cosmetic than real – Jack and Jackie replacing Dwight and Mamie, elegant, Eastern culture-vulture socialites replacing plain-vanilla Midwestern mom and dad. The truth about the politics of the President and his family was, of course, more complicated.

Jack Kennedy and his brother, confidant and campaign organiser, Robert, were the sons of Joseph Kennedy. Joe Kennedy, an anti-Semitic, Communist-hating multimillionaire whose wealth, it is said, was of dubious provenance (bootlegging has been mentioned) had been an enthusiastic supporter of Senator McCarthy. This last aspect of the Kennedy patriarch's world-view found an echo in the career paths of his clever, ambitious surviving sons (his eldest, Joe Jr, having been killed on active service in 1944).

As a junior congressman, Jack publicly praised McCarthy for his anti-Communist vigilance. Robert actually worked as a counsel on the Wisconsin senator's then all-powerful Permanent Sub-Committee on Investigations. A senator since 1952, Jack was the only Democrat to abstain in the Senate's vote of condemnation against McCarthy, passed by a majority of 67 to 22, which broke the demagogue's power in December 1954.¹

Moreover, Senator Kennedy, was not above playing the 'Red scare' card. Looking to place himself for a presidential run in 1960, he began loudly complaining that the Soviets were pulling ahead of the United States in the arms race. In a way that, for all its anti-Communist thrust, oddly colluded with Khrushchev's self-serving post-*Sputnik* braggadocio, Kennedy made the alleged 'missile gap' one of the main themes in his presidential campaign.

So the young, handsome President who made such a brilliant inauguration speech that freezing January day, was something of a puzzling mixture. He was not really considered by the liberal wing of his party to be 'one of them'.² It was not the sophisticated, Harvard-educated Kennedy but a conservative military man, the retiring President Eisenhower, who warned the American people in his valedictory television broadcast about the dangers of the 'military-industrial complex'.

Kennedy appeared the picture of the civilised liberal yet had no clear record of supporting liberal causes. He talked of peace and yet railed in aggressively anxious terms against the 'missile gap'. He certainly seemed to have nothing much against the military-industrial complex. As another Massachusetts-Irish politician said of him:

There's something about Jack – and I don't know quite what it is – that makes people want to believe in him. Conservatives and liberals both tell you that he's with them because they want to believe that he is, and they want to be with him.³

In the weeks after Kennedy's election, the Eastern Bloc's leaders had a similar problem. How to handle the new man in the White House?

In September 1960, the former KPD chief and President of the GDR Wilhelm Pieck died at the age of eighty-five. Within weeks, the post of president was abolished and a 'State Council' set up to replace it. The council's chairman was, of course, Walter Ulbricht. The First Secretary of the SED became also *de facto* head of state. It was thus an even more powerful Ulbricht who entered the crucial new year of 1961. In effect, a dictator.

The omnipotent one had much to do, many decisions to make. Detailed official briefings for Ulbricht broke down the new American

President's support in conventional Marxist-Leninist terms, outlining Kennedy's ties to Wall Street and the major corporations.⁴

Fair enough. Kennedy came from money, and no politician got that far without corporate support. JFK's appointment of the Californian-born president of the Ford Motor Company, Robert S. (for Strange) McNamara as Secretary of Defense fitted perfectly into this Marxist paradigm. The GDR officials did not fail to remind their boss, with some relish, that Ford had provided financial support for Hitler. Equally predictable for the East Berlin analysts was the presence of an 'unrepentant Republican' in the form of C. Douglas Dillon, Secretary of the Treasury. Dillon was a holdover from the Eisenhower administration. As a leading investment banker, he provided the new Democratic administration with a touch of non-partisan appeal and the much-needed *gravitas* of an establishment figure who could, as Kennedy recognised, 'call a few of those people on Wall Street by their first names'.⁵

The tendency in general among Kennedy's advisers (his so-called 'brains trust') was, however, more biased towards academics, including such Ivy League luminaries as J.K. Galbraith, Arthur Schlesinger and Seymour Harris (all Harvard), and the economic historian and expert on 'overcoming backwardness', Walt Rostow (MIT). Kennedy's administration was the first one in which 'think tanks' – especially the RAND Corporation – came to the fore, and memoranda on every subject from just about every conceivable angle started to flood into the White House's in-tray.

Even Kennedy's Secretary of State was no toughie Cold War warrior in the mode of the late John Foster Dulles but a conscientious, not especially combative Georgian liberal, Dean Rusk. The President in any case planned to make his own foreign policy. In this he was advised by his younger brother, Robert, whom he had daringly brought into the administration as attorney-general, defying inevitable accusations of nepotism.⁶

The advice to Ulbricht from his advisers was that, while the new administration would still stand strongly on Western rights in West Berlin, Kennedy would be more flexible than Eisenhower when it came to the city's overall status. Here was a faultline in the edifice of Western solidarity that might be exploited.

This view was shared by Ulbricht's ultimate master, the mercurial Nikita Khrushchev, who by all accounts saw Kennedy as potentially weak, a rich man's son whose daddy's money had bought him a high position which might prove beyond his powers. And the new American President, at forty-three, still lacked experience at the highest level – he was, as Khrushchev pointed out, 'younger than my own son'.⁷

But would this enable the shrewd, aggressive Soviet leader to bully Kennedy into making significant concessions? Or might it mean, on the contrary, that the younger leader, with his plutocratic background, would prove an obedient tool of the Wall Street capitalists, who were sworn to destroy the USSR at any price?

Khrushchev wobbled between these two possible scenarios, even confiding to US Ambassador Thompson before the elections that he wished Nixon would win 'because I'd know how to cope with him. Kennedy is an unknown quantity.'

Scarcely had Kennedy settled into the White House than the Bay of Pigs fiasco in April 1961 – a disastrous, American-supported attempt to overthrow the regime of Fidel Castro in Cuba – ensured that hopes of a bright new morning were dashed. The Bay of Pigs made fools of Kennedy and his advisers, and damaged hopes of impressing developing nations with America's new, progressive foreign policy. On the other hand, it strengthened Khrushchev, who could posture as the true friend of the Third World and its protector against the interfering, imperialistic Americans.

A few days before the Bay of Pigs disaster, the Soviets managed to put into space, for a little more than an hour and a half, and then bring back to earth, Lieutenant Yuri Gagarin (he was promoted to major in the middle of his flight, which he was not expected to survive). The world was treated to a glorious and peaceful technological achievement of the USSR, contrasted just a few days later with naked American aggression against Cuba. It was, especially for those who failed to recognise the underlying and deeply frightening violence that underpinned the Soviet sphere of influence, a telling comparison. That comparison did not favour the United States.

The Gagarin flight, notwithstanding its apparently innocent public-relations benefits, also underlined the military potential of Soviet

rocketry. Khrushchev himself had, by this point, become drawn into a passionate, quite strange love affair with missile-delivered nuclear weaponry, and the success of his country's cosmonauts was intimately associated with this. It involved the same powerful technology. The fact that it delivered Gagarin, a winningly handsome, though compact, five-foot-two metallurgist and father of two from a small town near Smolensk for a 108-minute flight above the atmosphere, rather than a nuclear warhead against Pittsburgh, did nothing to diminish its intimidating effect.

Khrushchev spoke publicly of turning out long-range missiles 'like sausages on an assembly line'. At the end of 1959, he had created the imposing-sounding 'Rocket Strategic Forces'. A few weeks later, he announced huge cuts in conventional military manpower (throwing up to a quarter of a million Red Army officers out of work), making it clear that he could afford to do this because the USSR's thermonuclear strength was now unmatched.

Hence Kennedy's campaign talk of the threatening 'missile gap' between the US and the USSR. The bright young senator from Massachusetts genuinely believed the Russians were pulling ahead. In fact, Khrushchev's 'missile' talk was mostly bluff. His impressive-sounding 'Rocket Strategic Forces' consisted of 'four unwieldy R-7s on a launching pad near Plesetsk in Northern Russia'.⁸

In one matter, however, Kennedy and his advisers were right to be concerned. Far from making Khrushchev more cautious, the Soviet leader's grasp of the importance of thermonuclear equality made him more, not less, bold in his foreign-policy calculations. As Khrushchev later boasted to colleagues, he had realised as early as the mid-1950s, when the Soviets still possessed only conventional aircraftborne nuclear bombs, that Secretary of State Dulles's threats of massive retaliation were also bluff – brinkmanship based on the fact that both sides knew where the brink was and would act accordingly.⁹

Now that the Soviet Union had ended this monopoly, it could rely on the resulting assurance of mutual destruction to keep the peace while Moscow 'protected' the independence of Third World countries and supported 'national liberation movements'. These movements would chip away at capitalism's power and draw most of the world into the

socialist camp within the foreseeable future without the need for a decisive war.

Meanwhile, the West would have to 'respect' Russia. The short, egotistical Khrushchev, mocked by Stalin as a clown and secretly despised by colleagues for his unsophisticated peasant ways, was keen on 'respect'. This made him unpredictable. Humiliate Khrushchev, and there was no clear limit to what he might do.

The Russian leader's public pronouncements did not help. 'We shall bury you!' Khrushchev famously declared – meaning not that the Soviets planned to exterminate the other side, but that the East would preside over the last rites of capitalism when the latter finally collapsed in the face of socialism's unstoppable success. However, the remark could be interpreted in a more worrying way. And Khrushchev was not above crude threats. At official receptions, the normally genial Soviet leader would suddenly cut the small talk, turn on Western diplomats, and remind them exactly how many missiles it would take to destroy their major cities.

Khrushchev was 'on a roll'. Not only was the East starting to prove its superiority in space and weapons technology, but soon, Moscow assured the world, it would show its economic superiority as well.

There were, of course, flaws in this optimistic view, some more obvious than others. The situation in the GDR was one. All the talk in East German official documents of the 'crisis of capitalism' that was supposedly wrecking the USA could not conceal the regime's increasing concern about its own economic difficulties – and especially the persistent haemorrhaging of its population to the West.

Something had to be done.

Ulbricht was sure he knew what it was. Khrushchev, who had staked a great deal on the inherently superior nature of the socialist system over the capitalist one, and hoped to convince the rest of the world of this, still remained to be convinced.

Two years had now passed since Khrushchev's original 'ultimatum' on Berlin.

The irritatingly persistent Ulbricht kept reminding his protector that in the interim nothing had actually happened. Khrushchev protested

that this was not true, that the West had been 'shaken up' by Moscow's pressure, and so on. He continued to stall, but Ulbricht did not give up. In late January 1961, an East German delegation passed through Moscow. Not unusual, except Khrushchev was only now told that they were on their way to talks with the Chinese in Peking. This was the first he had heard of it.¹⁰

Khrushchev's relations with Chairman Mao Tse-tung had been deteriorating for years, in part due to the Russian's denunciation of Stalin, who was still officially worshipped in China. Mao had also started dropping none-too-subtle hints that Khrushchev's talk of coexistence with the West amounted to capitulation. What was the point, the Chinese argued, of all this bragging about the Soviet Union's nuclear capacity, if Khrushchev did not use it to spread revolution and overthrow capitalism?

In early 1960, Russia had pulled its advisers out of China and scrapped a host of joint projects. A Sino-Soviet truce was patched together in November, but for high-level East German officials to be visiting Peking just two months later was a signal that they were prepared to pursue an independent line. Ulbricht remained on better terms with 'the great helmsman' in Peking than was strictly comfortable to Moscow.

What was happening in early 1961 was quite simple. The tail was practising how to wag the dog, and finding that it wasn't so hard a thing to master. The paradoxical position of the GDR as the Eastern Bloc's politically weakest but at the same time most strategically crucial element had, back in 1953, led to Ulbricht's unexpected survival. The 17 June uprising had been mostly due to Ulbricht's rigidity and stubbornness. This was a fact of which Moscow was fully aware. But it could not afford to get rid of him, for fear of admitting weakness, and thus further destabilising an already unstable situation. Over and over, Khrushchev would continue to assure Ulbricht of his support, and of the GDR's importance to the Eastern Bloc.

Seven years later, Ulbricht was more firmly than ever in the saddle in the GDR, but the state itself was in increasing trouble. What to do?

Attempts at economic reform, imposed by Moscow during the post-Stalin liberalisation, had been half-heartedly implemented for a while and then slowly reversed.

The results of what amounted to a re-Stalinisation of the economy were predictably poor. The collectivisation of agriculture, which was once more aggressively pursued during the late 1950s, led to food shortfalls and a flight from the countryside (often to the West).¹¹ The radical restructuring of industry, involving further attacks on privately owned concerns, meant that productivity and living standards remained low, despite continual raising of 'work norms'.

By early 1960, the GDR was suffering from serious shortages of raw materials and quality industrial products as well as food. It was heavily in debt both to the USSR and the West. Far from overtaking West Germany, the GDR was falling farther behind. If such a word were permitted in the Communist economic lexicon – which it was not – then the situation in East Germany could only be described as a recession.¹²

The exodus from East to West Germany had continued. It had averaged around a quarter of a million a year from 1955, took a dip in 1959 to 143,000, then rose again in 1960 to a little over 199,000. The deterioration of the situation in 1960 itself was a sharp one, with numbers more than doubling from just under 10,000 in February to 20,285 in May. Again it was the skilled workers, the doctors (of whom 20 per cent fled westwards between 1954 and 1961) and nurses and teachers and engineers, who were choosing to go west.

With the propaganda offensive against West Germany increasing in virulence, and the gradual tightening of restrictions on movement between East and West Berlin, a sense was spreading throughout the GDR that can only be expressed by a German word: *Torschlusspanik* – literally, panic that the door will be closed.

Because of these population losses, the GDR was also suffering from a labour shortage. This led Ulbricht at one point, during a private conversation with Khrushchev, to suggest that 'guest workers' be brought from the Soviet Union to do the jobs that East Germans were either unavailable for or unwilling to perform. Khrushchev was furious. 'Imagine how a Soviet worker would feel,' he snapped back. 'He won the war and now he has to clean your toilets!'¹³

The two men had known each other for about twenty years. Khrushchev, a member of Stalin's inner circle, was senior commissar on the Stalingrad Front in 1942. Ulbricht and other German Communist exiles

were sent there to encourage members of the *Wehrmacht* to surrender, and if possible to join one of the Soviet prisoner-of-war organisations such as the 'National Committee Free Germany'.

The wartime relationship was an uneasy one. The stocky commissar wasted few opportunities to make jokes at his dour German comrade's expense. As the staff sat down to enjoy their evening rations after a day's work in the front line, a grinning Khrushchev would frequently chide him: 'Oh, Comrade Ulbricht, it doesn't look as if you have earned your supper today. No Germans have surrendered!'¹⁴

Well, if Ulbricht hadn't brought any Germans to Khrushchev on those dark wartime days, in peacetime he had brought, and kept, many millions of them.

The view of most Russians, including Khrushchev, was that they had fought and vanquished Germany and were entitled to the spoils.

But there were also sound military aspects to the Soviets' attachment to East Germany. To have that forward position, pointing at the heart of NATO, had always been important, and became harder to give up as weaponry became more advanced. Even more so since April 1959, when the first Soviet medium-range SS3 nuclear missiles were stationed in East Germany, apparently without the knowledge of the GDR government. These were the first nuclear-armed missiles that Khrushchev stationed outside the Soviet Union.¹⁵

The Americans quickly suspected, from their own intelligence, that missiles had been introduced to East Germany. Had the CIA but known it, the original deployment had contained a distinct element of dark farce, familiar to armed forces everywhere but to the Russian ones in particular. Not only did the liquid oxygen in the missiles evaporate within thirty days – a common problem with the Soviet rockets of the time¹⁶ – but it was found that soldiers had been literally drinking the rocket fuel. 'Some . . . replaced the blue-coloured 92 percent ethanol, which was coveted by the troops under the name "the Blue Danube", with a typical yellow methanol.'¹⁷ With potentially disastrous results.

In early 1961, Khrushchev was pursuing a risky twin-track policy. On the one hand, he was presiding over a propaganda campaign to give the impression of overwhelming nuclear force, and backing it up with nuclear braggadocio.¹⁸ On the other, he was concerned to set up a

summit with the new American President at which he could reach some peaceful understanding on world problems.

President Theodore Roosevelt had advised statesmen to 'speak softly and carry a big stick'. Khrushchev carried a big stick (or pretended to) but did not speak softly. The result was that the West – and Washington in particular – became genuinely concerned that he might use his weapons of mass destruction. In short, Khrushchev made Kennedy and his people nervous. And distrustful of his intentions.

Nor was Walter Ulbricht any help. For a while he had been turning the screw on the rights of West German citizens to enter East Berlin, and on West Berliners to travel there with West German passports. But on 23 September 1960, on his own initiative, Ulbricht suddenly announced that all Western diplomats accredited to the West German government would have to obtain permission from the GDR Foreign Ministry in East Berlin before entering either the Eastern sector of Berlin or the territory of the GDR proper.

Free movement between West Germany and Berlin by Allied diplomats had been a routine matter for fifteen years. When Walter Dowling, US ambassador in Bonn, heard of this new outrage, he flew direct to West Berlin. There he sat himself in an official car with diplomatic number plates, flying the American flag, and presented himself at the border with East Berlin. The East German guard refused to let him pass. Dowling insisted on his rights. Despite the official paraphernalia festooning the car, the guard demanded identification. Dowling did then show his ID, thus conceding the guard's right to demand it and surrendering his own right to unimpeded access to the Eastern sector.¹⁹ The Allies argued that the *Grepo* (border policeman) was simply a local agent of the Soviet authorities and therefore basic four-power rights were unaffected. All the same, Ulbricht had won a victory of sorts in his war of attrition.

But his Soviet superiors were displeased. He had not consulted them. For a satellite country to conduct policy independently in this way was unheard of.²⁰

As the long-suffering Soviet ambassador in East Berlin, Mikhail Pervukhin, told Moscow with weary understatement, there was 'a certain inflexibility of the GDR leaders in practical activity concerning West Berlin'.

Exasperated, Khrushchev demanded that Ulbricht desist from further provocations until they next met at the end of November. Ulbricht backed down for the moment. Their point made, the East Germans no longer insisted on prior applications from Western diplomats.

Khrushchev and Ulbricht met in Moscow on 30 November 1960. The encounter took place just after the end of an almost three-week-long conference of eighty-one Communist and workers' parties, during which the headline subject had been the difficulties between the USSR and the People's Republic of China.

At this mini-summit with Khrushchev, Ulbricht bemoaned the GDR's continuing economic difficulties, for which he blamed not his rigid command economy, but dependency on Western imports (particularly machinery and spare parts from the Federal Republic). Plus, of course, there was West German political interference and the poaching of his qualified work-force, attracted by higher salaries, resettlement grants, and the more ready availability of consumer goods in the West. 'We shall,' Ulbricht concluded, 'try to protect ourselves from these unpleasant things, and the number of conflicts in Berlin will increase . . .'

The Soviet leader reminded Ulbricht that he, Khrushchev, had an agreement with the Americans. There would be no basic change in the status quo over Berlin until he had a chance to discuss the world situation with the new American President at the forthcoming summit, projected for summer 1961. The West must never be able to accuse Nikita Khrushchev of bad faith. Under no circumstances, it was made clear to Ulbricht, would Soviet forces move into West Berlin. Instead, Khrushchev suggested, 'we will work out with you a tactic of gradually crowding out the Western powers from West Berlin, but without war'.²¹ Ulbricht was to behave like a good, obedient satellite leader.

Not for the first time, Khrushchev's hopes proved illusory. Ulbricht was a master of pinprick politics, of creating facts on the ground by changes so small that only the keenest observer could realise his ultimate aim. He kept to the letter but not to the spirit of his agreement with Khrushchev.

Throughout the winter of 1960-1, the East Germans continued to harass border-crossers and German trans-sector visitors. There were temporary closures of crossing points, spot checks, swoops on public

transport at the sector borders at which East Berliners who worked in West Berlin were turned back, and threatened with future punishment if they persisted. But all this was done within existing practice.

Planning for the superpower summit was meanwhile still in its earliest stages, but that did nothing to deter Ulbricht. He raised the subject of a full Berlin border closure again in January 1961 and pressed for it to be on the agenda at the Warsaw Pact meeting in late March.

The East German leader had it all worked out. He just needed Khrushchev to say the word.

Ulbricht's amazingly stubborn and persistent *modus operandi* was largely what had brought him to supreme power in the GDR. It was almost a pity that his outstanding (though by no means attractive) qualities were confined to such a small stage as that of the sickly, synthetic, seventeen-million-strong client state over which he ruled.

Ulbricht was also bolstered by a bizarre personality cult within the GDR, comparable with that of Stalin and certainly more conspicuous than the relatively modest status accorded to Khrushchev in contemporary Marxist-Leninist hagiolatry.

The young East German writer Brigitte Reimann noted in her diary that year:

The personality cult never flourished before as it does today. Our writers are not ashamed to write slimy abominations in which they compare him with the great, truly great, Lenin. There are 'Ulbricht shrines', the whole thing reeks of religious nonsense.²²

Reimann was a convinced Marxist who hoped that eventually the regime would come good. Others were not so idealistic, nor so patient. They continued to flood into West Berlin, especially as the months passed and Ulbricht's 'pinprick' policy continued.

Once across the border, such 'deserters' would identify themselves as refugees from the GDR. They would then be directed to Marienfelde reception camp.

Marienfelde lay in the far south of West Berlin's Schöneberg district, part of the American sector. An enclosed, somewhat depressing complex

of barracks-like accommodation blocks and processing halls. The camp had been built to cope with West Berlin's new status as the 'escape hatch' from the GDR after Ulbricht sealed off the main German/German border in the summer of 1952. It had been opened in 1953, shortly before the 17 June uprising. The frantic exodus that followed the uprising flooded its facilities to overflow. Marienfelde became internationally famous.

Emigrants would be interviewed on arrival, to ascertain their wishes and filter out possible East German spies. They would stay at Marienfelde until flown out to West Germany proper, where accommodation and jobs would be arranged.

Those who wanted to remain in West Berlin faced difficulties. The half-city was better off than the East, but it was not booming in the way of the Federal Republic. Refugees were automatically sent to West Germany, where there was a need for skilled labour of all kinds, or where, if qualified, they could study.

Joachim Trenkner, a doctor's son from a provincial town in Thuringia, arrived in West Berlin 'with a twenty-pfennig one-way train ticket' towards the end of 1959. Twenty-four years old, he had decided to escape what he described as 'the stink of petit-bourgeois GDR provincial life'. Joachim had studied engineering at Leipzig University, frequently visited Berlin, and liked what he saw there. He could have continued to study any subject he liked in West Germany. The trouble was, he loved Berlin and wanted to stay in the divided city.

At Marienfelde, Joachim endured questioning by all three Allied intelligence services, then made the wearying progress from office to office, bureaucrat to bureaucrat, before gaining the precious Western identity card that entitled him to live and work in the Federal Republic. Successfully delaying attempts to put him on a plane to West Germany, he found that there were, in fact, certain categories of person permitted to stay in West Berlin. One was industrial fitters, of which there was a shortage there. Joachim had actually taken a factory-based practical course before going on to study in Leipzig. So, this somewhat bookish young man, flourishing his East German certificate, went to work in a West Berlin factory, situated just on the other side of the street from the East but a whole universe away.

There were adjustment problems, of course. On the factory floor,

Joachim's mid-German accent led at first to his being referred to by his rough-edged Berlin-born colleagues as 'Saxon shit' (*Sachsenscheisse*). Ulbricht was conspicuously from Saxony, as were many other leading East German Communists. The presence of so many carpet-bagging Saxon careerists in East Berlin caused Berliners to describe them disparagingly as 'the fifth occupying power'. Unsurprisingly, Joachim quickly modified his native burr into an approximation of the local argot.

Joachim eventually moved from the 'hopelessly over crowded' refugee camp to a small furnished room near his new workplace. He was earning West marks, and found that he could cross the street into East Berlin and 'suddenly I was Croesus'.

For a Westerner, a beer in the pub on the eastern side of the street cost just a quarter or a third of the price of what you had to pay in the West – according to the rate of exchange. We Westerners could visit a hairdresser for a few pfennigs, for a handful of change we could spend an evening at the State Opera in East Berlin, or the Berliner Ensemble theatre. For a few marks, we could go into state-owned stores and buy records or books. East Berlin was a shopping paradise, a kind of duty-free port. The only thing was, you mustn't let yourself be caught with this low-priced booty on your way back into West Berlin. Of course, at that time we did not know how long the East German state could go on permitting this 'fire sale' situation, or how long, with the refugees still pouring over the border into the West, it would be able to cope with the loss of its human life blood. But by the beginning of 1961, at the latest, we were discussing this subject every day. There were heated debates among friends and work-mates, and everyone sensed that something dramatic was going to happen. But a wall right through the city, as was occasionally suggested? No, our imaginations didn't stretch that far . . .²⁵

Here was just one more son of the GDR who slipped westwards in the final months when Berlin was still an open city. Joachim owed the workers' and peasants' state his education, or so its leaders insisted. While the decision to cross the border had been his alone – he simply wanted more than the East could give – it was not surprising that Ulbricht and co. blamed wicked Western machinations for the loss of

such precious human assets. They were, after all, hardly going to blame themselves.

During the early months of 1961, the East began to ratchet up its propaganda machine. There was talk of 'people-trafficking', of innocent East German citizens being lured west by bribes, even kidnapped off the streets. There was nothing to prevent the capitalists from infiltrating the GDR to do their evil work. The GDR was left defenceless against the West's tricks and wiles.

So Ulbricht claimed at the Warsaw Pact meeting in March 1961, when he brought up the subject of Berlin once more:

In this political and economic struggle against our republic [he told the Moscow conference], West Berlin plays the role of the channel with whose help this trade in people is practised, and through which also food and other materials flow out of our republic. West Berlin is therefore a big hole in the middle of our republic, which costs us more than a billion marks each year.²⁴

There is no written proof from the actual records of the meeting that he made any material suggestions as to how this 'hole' might be plugged, but Jan Sejna, a senior aide to the then Czechoslovak Defence Minister, who later defected to the West, testified that during another session Ulbricht actually did talk about counter-measures. He suggested, so Sejna claimed, plugging it with 'guard units from our border organs, with barriers, even with barbed wire fences'. The others rejected this as too provocative.²⁵ However, Khrushchev allowed Ulbricht to start exploring military options to stop the refugee flow, including the closing of the sector border.²⁶

Two months later, in May, the East Germans (coily referred to as 'our friends') were reported by Ambassador Pervukhin to be pushing the same line, and to blazes with the global priorities of Soviet foreign policy:

Our friends would like to establish now such control on the sector border between democratic and West Berlin which would allow them to, as they say, 'close the door to the West' and reduce the exodus of the population from the Republic and weaken the influence of economic conspiracy against the GDR, which is carried out directly from West Berlin.²⁷

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Khrushchev's options were narrowing down. Ulbricht knew it. Perhaps the Soviet leader did too, but he was determined to change nothing in Berlin until he could sound out Kennedy. The long-awaited Soviet-American summit had now been fixed for the first week of June in Vienna.

Khrushchev wanted to look Kennedy in the eye and see if he looked as though he would start a war over Berlin. He knew that among the President's entourage were some who favoured a variation of the 'free city' solution for West Berlin. Ever an optimist and a gambler, perhaps Khrushchev hoped against reason that Ulbricht's embarrassingly repressive solution to the problem could be avoided after all.

It goes against most received wisdom in the West, even now, that Khrushchev and his fellow Soviet leaders actually acted rationally in their attempt to deal with the disastrous situation of the GDR and the (to Moscow) equally important fact of an economically and increasingly militarily powerful West Germany.

The Russians suspected Adenauer's West Germany of biding its time, waiting for the GDR to fall apart, and furthering this in various subtle and not so subtle ways. Khrushchev could justifiably worry that reunification would become inevitable simply because the GDR was no longer viable. This was why he tried to force the West's hand from 1958 onwards, in the hope that the capitalists would decide to buy peace by making an acceptable deal. The Soviet leader did not want war. In fact, he wanted (and needed) *détente* so that the Soviet Union could tackle its own economic problems.

Khrushchev faced a dilemma. If he was not aggressive enough, the West would sit tight and wait for the GDR (and possibly the East Bloc in general) to fall apart. If he pushed too hard, however, he might provoke a counter-reaction, in the shape of Western military and economic sanctions against the East. Such sanctions would seriously harm the economies of the Warsaw Pact countries in general and East Germany in particular. Khrushchev was on a tightrope. This highly intelligent but naturally aggressive man was not really built for such a delicate operation – especially when he had Ulbricht constantly shaking the rope from below . . .

In the end, the much-heralded meeting with Kennedy from 3 to 4 June in Vienna was a clear disappointment. The US embassy hosted the leaders for the first day's talks. They met in its spacious music room, elegantly decorated in grey and red. Later they attended a big dinner on neutral ground, at the Austrian government's Schönbrunn Palace. On the second day, they moved to the Soviet embassy.

The summit turned into a tense, scrappy affair. It was not quite as bad for Soviet-American relations as the abandoned Paris summit the previous year, but it did not lead to anything like the hoped-for improvements, or get either Khrushchev or Kennedy far in their immediate aims.

Personal diplomacy in the age of the ICBM proved altogether problematical. Kennedy seemed somewhat dazed by Khrushchev's sheer brutal energy. However, if Khrushchev hoped to bully the younger, less experienced man into concessions, he was proved wrong. His attempts to browbeat the American backfired.

By the same token, if Kennedy hoped to use his famously potent charm, that too failed. For Khrushchev, hardened in the triumph-or-die Stalinist school, an opponent's reliance on emollient personality traits indicated just one thing: weakness.

It must be said in mitigation that the President made no concessions worth mentioning, either on Berlin or on the idea of an immediate German peace treaty. Khrushchev blustered and threatened as usual. He would end all occupation rights in Berlin, he kept reminding Kennedy, including Western access to the city, and sign a peace treaty with Ulbricht alone.

'Khrushchev repeated this pledge no fewer than ten times that day,' the Soviet leader's biographer tells us, 'as if trying to convince himself as well as Kennedy.'

The last time Khrushchev did this, just as they were about to part after the second and final day of the summit, Kennedy made his famously cool reply: 'If that's true,' he said, 'it's going to be a cold winter.'²⁸

In an *aide-mémoire* that was handed to the Americans at the summit – a kind of slow-release poisoned pellet in text form – Moscow restored its six-month ultimatum on the signing of a German peace treaty. Deadlines had come and gone, starting in November 1958, but now Khrushchev

insisted his ultimatum was final. If no agreement was made by the end of 1961, he would sign a separate peace treaty with East Germany. Yes, he would.

'Roughest thing in my life,' Kennedy confessed to an American journalist after the Vienna summit:

I think he did it because of the Bay of Pigs. I think he thought that anyone who was so young and inexperienced as to get into that mess could be taken. . . . I've got a terrible problem. If he thinks I'm inexperienced and have no guts, until we remove those ideas we won't get anywhere with him. So we have to act.²⁹

Prime Minister Macmillan of Britain saw Kennedy in London after the summit, and commented on how exhausted he seemed. The President told Macmillan that he had been 'concerned and even surprised by the almost brutal frankness and confidence' of the Russian leader. The summit, Kennedy admitted, had led to 'no progress on any issue'.³⁰

At Vienna, Khrushchev, most commentators agreed, had 'won' the actual encounter between the two men. Khrushchev also thought this, and believed that he could run rings around Kennedy in future too. This belief in his own superiority would dictate an aggressive foreign policy over the next year and a half or so.

The misunderstandings that marked and then followed the Vienna meeting brought great danger for the world. It was not until the Cuban Crisis of October 1962 that the leaders really got each other's measure, and when that happened it was Khrushchev who came out the loser.

On the ground in Berlin everything was moving in Ulbricht's direction. The East German leader had successfully parlayed his weakness into strength. He had the superpowers at each other's throats, which was just where he wanted them.

The day after the Vienna summit, Ulbricht's Interior Minister, Karl Maron, ordered a so-called 'special security unit' of 1,500 *Vopos* to be established in Berlin. In addition, the strength of East Berlin's specialised 'Readiness Police Brigade' (responsible for crowd and riot control) was to be increased to almost 4,000. This was to be done by transferring one

company per battalion from throughout the GDR to Berlin, stripping the élite security police in the provincial GDR of around 30 per cent of its total strength. These reinforcement operations were to be carried out before 30 June 1961. Such radical and expensive measures could only point to an imminent major security operation in Berlin.³¹

Walter Ulbricht's great hour was finally approaching. The hour of the Wall.