

Recalling the lesson of the Berlin Wall

by Nicholas F. Benton

The Berlin Wall: Kennedy, Khrushchev and a Showdown in the Heart of Europe

by Norman Gelb

Times Books, New York, 1986

321 pages, clothbound, \$19.95.

Journalist Norman Gelb, who was there on that infamous night of Aug. 13, 1961 when the Berlin Wall went up, serves a useful purpose by stirring our memory of the relevant events—beginning with the decision from Washington to hold the U.S. forces at the Elbe River and allow the Red Army to occupy Berlin at the end of World War II, escalating with the blockade and Berlin airlift of 1948, and culminating with the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962—leading up to and resulting from the erection of the Wall.

As a journalist reporting the events, including the expressive statistics of the waves of refugees who fled Soviet-occupied East Germany in the 1950s (a total of 2.1 million between 1949 and 1961), Gelb includes, although underplays, accounts of the monumental faction fights within successive U.S. administrations over how to handle the Berlin situation. While the trained eye sees in this reporting a tragic sequence of failures of nerve, if not downright treachery, that allowed the Soviets to impose their imperialist will consistently in Europe in the postwar period, Gelb tries to deny such obvious conclusions. Nonetheless, they are compelled by his own, often-eyewitness accounts.

The book tells the story of a pattern of failure of leadership from the United States, underscored by the repeated psychological impulse to demand an alternative to direct confrontation. This includes angry diatribes and restrictions placed on those wiser military minds, such as that of Gen. Lucius Clay, who knew the Soviet game and how to confront it. During the Soviet blockade of Berlin in 1948, for example, Clay advocated sending tanks storming down the autobahn through East Germany to break it. Instead, an airlift, a heroic effort, but one which avoided confronting the fundamental lawlessness of the Soviet act, was substituted.

Gelb provides a detailed account of the early June 1961 Vienna summit, where the newly elected President Kennedy emerged from a private meeting with Soviet Premier Nikita

Khrushchov visibly shaken, according to the account of columnist James Reston and others. He had been violently berated by Khrushchov (although Gelb does not report that he was actually physically assaulted by the Soviet brute). Having suffered through the botched Bay of Pigs affair only two months before, Kennedy proved to Khrushchov at Vienna to be a man who could be pushed around. So he warned Kennedy that he had six months to “normalize” Berlin, “or else,” and began a campaign to heat up the situation.

On June 21, the 20th anniversary of the German invasion of the Soviet Union in World War II, Khrushchov appeared in Red Square in the uniform of the Soviet lieutenant general—the rank he had attained as a political commissar attached to the Red Army during the war—to show he was serious about Berlin.

Khrushchov announced a few days later that a program for cutting more than a million men from the Soviet armed forces had been scrapped and that the Soviet military budget was being increased by one-third.

Then, West German intelligence sources reported that there were 67,500 Soviet and East German troops and 1,200 tanks in bases circling Berlin, within 30 miles of the city, “the greatest concentration of modern forces in the world.”

The Pentagon swiftly prepared to confront the Soviets. According to a report leaked in the July 3 *Newsweek*, “The Joint Chiefs of Staff has drawn up detailed proposals for steps to strengthen American’s military capabilities. Included were plans for evacuating a quarter of a million American military dependents in Europe; dispatching forces to West Germany to reinforce the five divisions already there; deploying forces in Europe into combat-ready positions; calling up four National Guard divisions and stepping up the draft; and moving atomic weapons into ‘ready’ positions, resuming atomic weapons tests, or demonstrating in other ways that the United States was ready to use such weapons.”

The leak made Kennedy livid. He ordered an FBI investigation into its source. The report was then characterized as “overstated.” Instead, President Kennedy surrounded himself with what Gelb reports were termed “softliners,” including Ambassador Llewellyn Thompson; Soviet affairs adviser Charles Bohlen; White House aide Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.; Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman William Fulbright; syndicated columnist Walter Lippmann; and Henry Kissinger, who was at the time a Harvard professor called in as a White House consultant. Bohlen feared that a “full mobilization” by the West would be a sign of “hysteria.” Kissinger, according to Gelb, “called for a ‘Kennedy Plan’ for Central Europe to deal with an overall European settlement and not just Berlin. He said if handled properly, an offer to talk to the Soviets would be seen as a sign of strength rather than weakness.”

As tensions grew, Kennedy consulted with his military adviser, Gen. Maxwell Taylor, as well as McGeorge Bundy, Ted Sorensen, Edward R. Murrow, and Dean Rusk in preparing for a watershed July 25 nationally televised speech to

respond to the Soviet challenge. Although the speech was interpreted as "hardline," and motivated a healthy enthusiasm in the U.S. population for that reason, the military experts on the Berlin situation, those at the Berlin mission and others known as "the Berlin mafia," were horrified by Kennedy's references to his determination to defend "West" Berlin. This would be read in the Kremlin, they correctly warned, as meaning Kennedy had conceded the right to the Soviets to do whatever they wanted in "East" Berlin—a right the Allies had taken great pains never to concede.

Nonetheless, it looked to the world like the superpowers were facing each other down. The flow of refugees from East Germany, through the Marienfelde refugee center in West Berlin, reached record levels. On the weekend after Kennedy's speech, 3,859 came through.

In the United States, thousands of young Americans volunteered for the draft. Talk of civil defense measures and bomb shelters reverberated across the land. On Aug. 9, Khrushchov announced that the Soviets had developed the capacity to build a 100-megaton nuclear warhead, adding, "Soviet missiles are not for slicing sausages."

Despite the relentless build-up of tensions, President Kennedy debarked for a weekend at his Hyannis Port retreat Friday, Aug. 11. At midnight, exactly, beginning the day of Sunday, Aug. 13, 1961 a siren sounded through the barracks of the militarized East German border police, 25 miles from the center of Berlin, and the mobilization to erect the Berlin Wall—ringing West Berlin's 103-mile perimeter with an impenetrable barrier—was begun.

By 3:30 a.m. the East Germans were installing obstructions on all major streets that previously had been crossing points. Vehicles with East Berlin license plates and East German pedestrians attempting to cross to the West through the obstructions were being turned back, while West Berliners trying to return home from the Soviet Sector were required to show identity papers before being let through. By 4:00 a.m. the first sketchy reports of barbed-wire barriers began playing on the radio.

By the time dawn broke that day, the West was confronted with a Wall that had not been there the night before. Still, it wasn't until that evening, Berlin time, that President Kennedy was even notified of the development. When Kennedy released a statement to the press, it said merely that "limitation on travel within Berlin is a violation of the four-power status of Berlin and . . . will be the subject of vigorous protest through appropriate channels." Gelb reports that many in Kennedy's cabinet were, in fact, "relieved" at the development, noting that "the refugee situation was getting out of hand, anyway." The State Department line, he said, was "basically to lie low and do nothing."

The rest is history. Two months later, on Oct. 27, the "Checkpoint Charlie" incident occurred, when 10 American M-48 tanks faced off against a like number of Soviet tanks for a few tense hours before both backed away. But the willingness of the U.S. to allow the permanent division of

Books Received

Winter Hawk, by Craig Thomas, William Morrow and Co., Inc., New York, 1987, 525 pages, \$18.95 hardcover.

The Road to Trinity, A Personal Account of How America's Nuclear Policies Were Made, by Maj. Gen. K.D. Nichols, U.S.A. (ret.), 401 pages, \$19.95 hardcover.

Anthony Eden: A Biography, by Robert Rhodes James. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1987. \$22.95 hardcover, 665 pages, 16 pages of black and white photographs.

Energy and the Federal Government: Fossil Fuel Policies 1900-1946, by John G. Clark. Champaign, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1987. \$39.95 hardcover, 511 pages.

America's Wars and Military Excursions, by Edwin P. Hoyt. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1987. \$24.95 hardcover, 540 pages. (A Military Book Club main selection)

Meditations at Sunset: A Scientist Looks at the World, by James Trefic. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1987. \$16.95 hardcover, 208 pages, illustrated.

Worth Dying For: A Pulitzer Prize Winner's Account of the Philippine Revolution, by Lewis M. Simons. New York: William Morrow and Co., Inc., 1987. \$18.95 hardcover, 320 pages.

Berlin invited Khrushchov to test Kennedy again the following year in Cuba, and the Soviets have not stopped—using irregular warfare, deceit in arms negotiations, and other tactics—pushing the West further and further onto the defensive ever since.

Gelb reminds the reader, almost inadvertently, that it was the "hardliners," those, he said, who were considered "too obsessed with the Communist menace" to have their views taken seriously, who turned out to be right. An example he cites was Stephen Koczak at the Berlin mission. Gelb says, "He was convinced the Communists would divide the city, and said so with a passion. . . . One mission member who served with him said Koczak has 'a brilliant mind which produced brilliant ideas but because he was thought to feel so strongly about issues generally, other minds were closed to his suggestions.' "