

The Berlin Wall divided families. West Berliners, desperate to keep in touch with relatives in the East, climb high to see and be seen over the concrete barrier. The Wall came to symbolize Europe's division, at the heart of the Cold War.

Bernauer Straße

105 94

Fein
Butter 9

KAFFEE HAT SCHMECKT
INNE
HERZ
SCHOKOLADEN
FESTSTREUEN

AUSWAHL-AUTOMAT

The Wall

1958-1963

An Ultimatum

At a Moscow reception on 10 November 1958, Khrushchev launched a new round in the battle for Berlin. In a public speech he insisted that the military occupation of Berlin, which had lasted since the end of the Second World War, should now come to an end. He demanded that the Western powers join the Soviet Union in signing a peace treaty recognizing the existence of the two Germanys. Khrushchev further proposed that Berlin should become a "free city" — free, that is, from the presence of Western occupation powers. But the sting came in the tail. Two weeks later Khrushchev gave the West a six-month ultimatum. Get out of Berlin, or the Soviet Union would sign its own peace treaty with East Germany. In that case, all rights of the Western powers in Berlin and all access agreements would thenceforth be subject to negotiation with the sovereign state of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). The message was clear: agree to withdraw, or be kicked out of Berlin altogether.

Khrushchev's ultimatum landed like a bombshell in the West. A no-surrender line had been drawn at Berlin. Ten years earlier the Berlin airlift had confirmed the West's determination to hold on to this advance base more than a hundred miles inside the Iron Curtain. The view then, and still in 1958, was that to hold Europe against communism it was essential to hold Berlin and prevent a permanent division of Germany into two separate states.

Khrushchev was known to act impulsively at times, but his new threats against Berlin had been carefully calculated. He was concerned about the lack of a formal German peace settlement thirteen years after the end of the war. West Germany was then in the midst of an "economic miracle" under Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, who wanted to re-unite West and East Germany.



Walter Ulbricht, Communist leader, inspects East German police assembled in Stalinallee. Behind him, centre, is Erich Honecker, who masterminded the plan to build the Wall.

A unified, capitalist Germany, armed with nuclear weapons and backed by the United States, raised the spectre once again of an aggressor Germany laying waste to the Soviet Union. Memories of the horrors of the Second World War were still strong. Papers prepared for the Presidium warned the Soviet leaders of the danger of a revived Germany uniting with Poland, and the reorientation of the Polish economy westward, leaving the USSR with no buffer zone on its western border. The deployment of American intermediate-range missiles in Europe, and the buildup of nuclear weapons within NATO, further alarmed the Kremlin.

Added to this Khrushchev felt a passionate commitment to establishing a Communist state in East Germany. He was a supporter of Walter Ulbricht, the East German leader, whose hard-line Stalinist policies had nearly toppled the regime in 1953. Khrushchev believed that if the West Germans were heirs to Hitler's ambitions, then East Germany, as a Communist state in the centre of Europe, symbolically justified Soviet war sacrifices. Khrushchev's ideology told him that communism would inevitably prevail over capitalism, but he seemed blind to the obvious fact that West Germany was striding ahead economically and leaving East Germany far behind.

He was only too aware, however, that every year tens of thousands of East Germans fled to capitalist West Germany: more than 300,000 in 1953, and



Two first secretaries in harmony: Nikita Khrushchev of the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party and Walter Ulbricht of the Socialist Unity Party of the German Democratic Republic.

Two Berlins. In the West (BELOW), affluence fuelled by West Germany's booming motor car industry; in the East (BELOW LEFT), a drabber scene. Short on consumer goods, East Berliners benefited from excellent health care and free education. Very many, however, chose to leave.

156,000 in 1956. A nine-hundred-mile boundary ran between the two states, and along it the East Germans had constructed a formidable frontier with watchtowers, barbed wire, minefields, and armed patrols. But Berlin, deep inside the Eastern state, offered an easy escape route. Movement around the city, in and out of the four military zones of occupation, was virtually unrestricted. Many East Berliners worked in West Berlin, and members of the same family lived in different zones. The underground train system, the U-Bahn, and the elevated trains, the S-Bahn, moved through all sectors. East Germans who wanted to emigrate, or defect to the West, slipped into East Berlin and then crossed to the Western sector. They either settled there or went to a refugee assembly point, the best known of which was Marienfelde. This vast, barracks-like reception centre processed hundreds of refugees every day, providing meals and temporary accommodation. In long lines, the refugees waited to be screened and interviewed. Many who had carefully concealed their plans for escape were astonished to find, in the next queue, neighbours or workmates who had made equally secret plans. Eventually, many were flown out to other cities in West Germany, all at the expense of the West German state, where the economic boom was generating a continuous demand for labour.

The vast majority of these refugees were young and skilled. More than half were below the age of twenty-five, and three out of four were under forty-five, the very people most needed to build the Communist state. Older people,

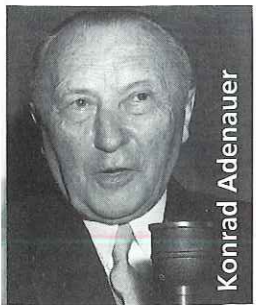
Portrait of Berlin, 1960

In 1960 Berlin was a tale of two cities. In West Berlin, with a population of 2 million, the rubble of war had mostly been cleared away. Lights shone at night down the Kurfürsten Damm, which was lined with smart shops and street cafés. Kempinski's served famous ice cream sundaes. One of the first Hilton hotels in Europe dominated the skyline. Theatres, concert halls, and nightclubs were packed. Many loved the busy, throbbing, cosmopolitan air of the city; others found it hectic, frantic.

Through the Brandenburg Gate, East Berlin was another world. The vast boulevard of the Unter den Linden, still elegant, was largely deserted. The huge Soviet Embassy stood on one side. Farther along, the destruction the war had brought was still visible. Buildings stood

derelict, next to empty spaces where others had been destroyed. Posters everywhere proclaimed, "Build the Socialist Fatherland." While everyone was fed and housed, the million people in East Berlin looked far from prosperous. In the drab new apartment blocks the services worked, but they were at a basic level. An East Berliner who could afford the luxury of a refrigerator would have to wait a year for one; for a washing machine, the wait was two years. Cars were not to be had on any waiting list. Consumer goods took no priority in an economy geared to earning necessary foreign currency through exports.

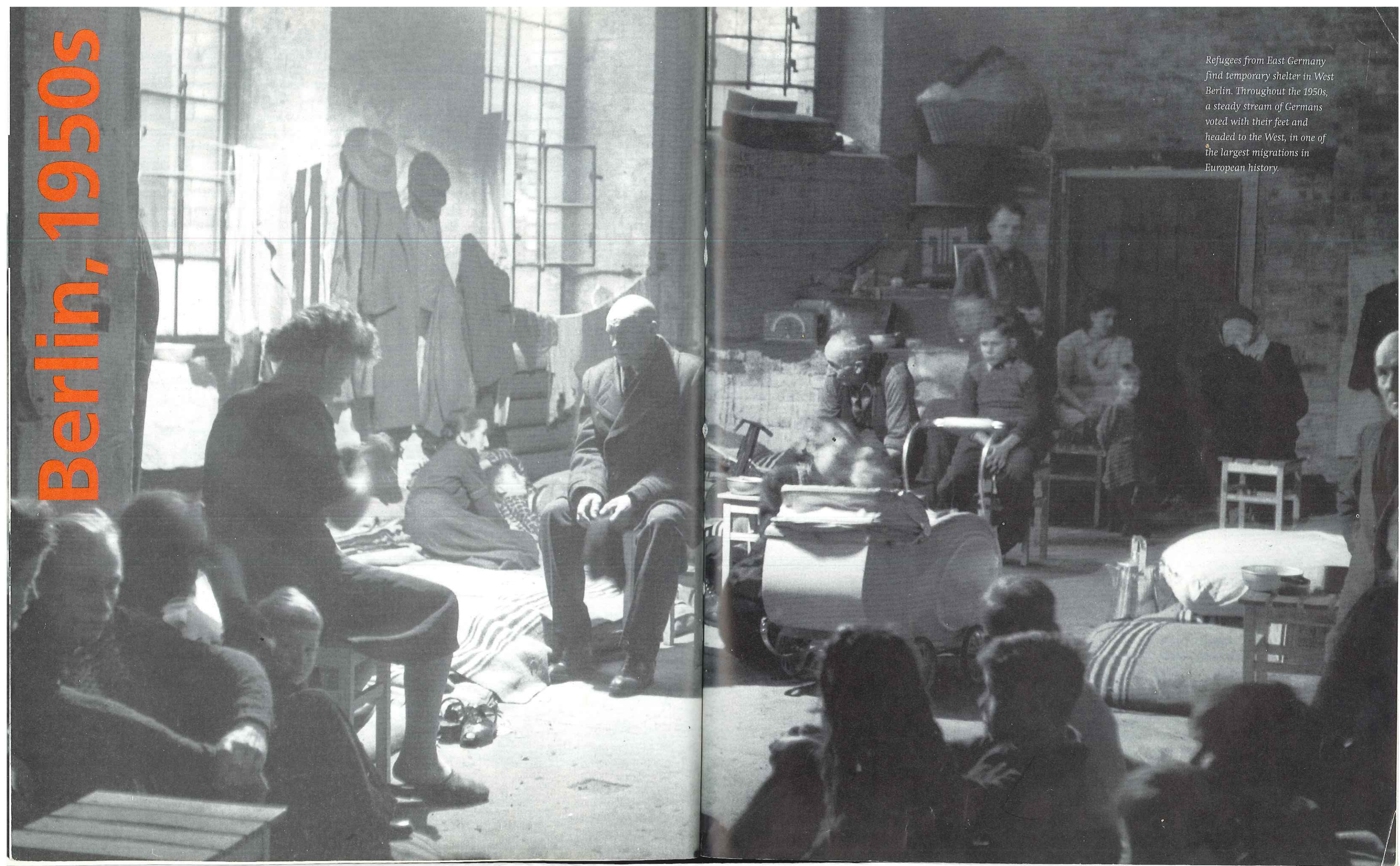
West Berlin had enjoyed the benefits of Western investment for fifteen years; in East Berlin, the Soviets had taken out everything they could from the economy. And it showed.



Konrad Adenauer



Berlin, 1950s



Refugees from East Germany find temporary shelter in West Berlin. Throughout the 1950s, a steady stream of Germans voted with their feet and headed to the West, in one of the largest migrations in European history.

East Germans line up to register at the Marienfelde Refugee Camp in West Berlin, 1961. Many were skilled workers. The East German government was desperate to stop this human flood.

on state pensions, were understandably less keen to start a new life in the West. The refugees numbered industrial workers, farm labourers, scientists, doctors, teachers, and other professionals. The entire law faculty of Leipzig University defected. Some came alone, some with their entire families, some even fled en masse as communities. Seventeen key engineers from one industrial plant left, taking the factory's blueprints with them. Thirty thousand students completed their studies (at state expense), received their diplomas, and then they fled. All were drawn to opportunities offered in the booming West, and the chance to escape the shortages and the restrictions of the Ulbricht regime, where every economic act was strictly controlled from the centre. Between 1949, when the GDR was created, and 1961, 2.8 million Germans crossed to the West in one of the biggest European migrations in history; one-sixth of the population abandoned the East for the good life they thought awaited them.

This exodus caused panic in the East. Not only was it a humiliating sign of the failure of the socialist utopia, but it created a serious labour shortage. Bosses, colleagues, friends were there one day and absent the next. Assembly lines were brought to a halt because a crucial worker had gone west. Skilled workers became more and more difficult to replace. Shoppers found there was no one in the store to serve them. In 1957 the GDR made *Republikflucht*, fleeing to the West, a criminal offence punishable with a prison sentence — if the escapee could be caught. The Communist-controlled press painted a lurid picture of life in the West: slave traders were capturing innocent young East Germans and selling the women into prostitution, the men into a life of drudgery. Still they went. Those who remained, under even stricter economic discipline, were called upon to make greater sacrifices. The result: another flood of workers to West Berlin.

Khrushchev Tries Personal Diplomacy

To make threats over Berlin was, for Khrushchev, to play for high stakes. And for the United States to pledge to hold on to Berlin at all costs created difficult military problems. The Joint Chiefs of Staff talked of using "whatever degree of force might be necessary" to maintain the garrison in Berlin. Dulles and Eisenhower realized, however, that any military confrontation might quickly escalate into the use of nuclear weapons. And Adenauer, who knew that Germany would be no-man's-land in any nuclear escalation between the great powers, responded by exclaiming, "For God's sake, not for Berlin." Eisenhower knew it would be difficult to ask the American people to go to war over a city that had been the capital of their hated enemy little more than a decade before. But there was a commitment, which Khrushchev recognized: "Berlin is the testicles of the West. . . . Every time I want to make the West scream, I squeeze on Berlin."

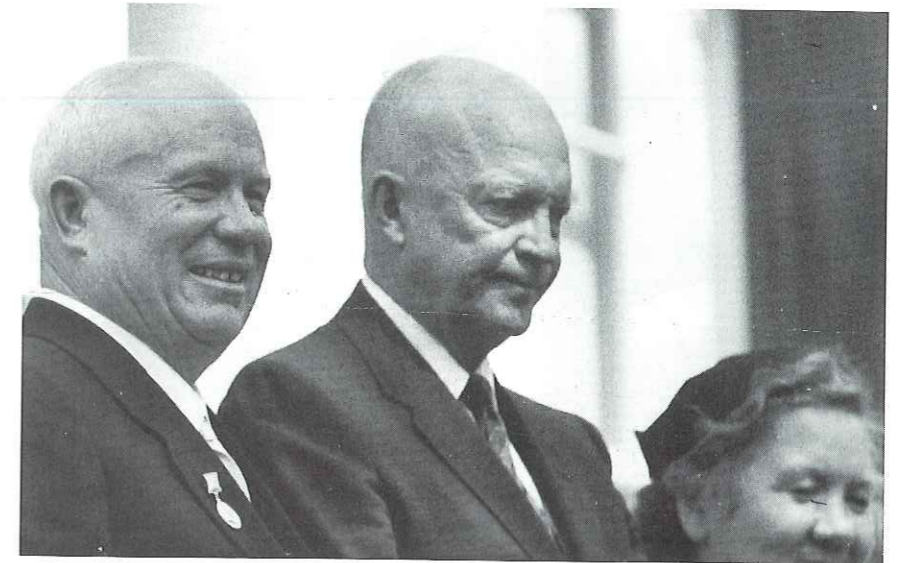
Khrushchev decided not to push his ultimatum. The West had responded to his threats with a flurry of diplomatic activity, and with speeches guaranteeing that West Berlin would not be abandoned. A four-power foreign ministers conference was called for the summer of 1959 in Geneva. By this time Khrushchev had decided to avoid confrontation, and the meetings brought

no agreement. The six-month deadline passed quietly into history.

In September 1959 Khrushchev, at Eisenhower's invitation, became the first Soviet leader ever to visit the United States. He arrived in New York in the largest aircraft in the world, the Soviet Tu-114 airliner, a reminder of Soviet technological superiority. Barely three years earlier the American press had accused the Soviet leaders of committing "monstrous crimes" and "the foulest treachery" against the Hungarian people. But now Khrushchev attracted crowds wherever he went, some of them a bit frosty. In Hollywood the stars turned out to meet him. He made several television appearances. In Iowa



Khrushchev was surprised and impressed by the American standard of living when he visited the United States in 1959. ABOVE: In Iowa, enjoying his first hot dog. ABOVE RIGHT: Khrushchev and his wife with Eisenhower in Washington.



he was astonished to see the prosperity of a simple farming community. Thousands watched the Communist leader pass by in his motorcade. Khrushchev loved every minute of it.

The success of his high-profile trip made peaceful co-existence appear a real possibility. At the end of the visit, Khrushchev and Eisenhower had a few days together at Camp David, the presidential retreat in Maryland. There the leaders of the two superpowers talked frankly with each other. "There was nothing more inadvisable in this situation," said Eisenhower, "than to talk about ultimatums, since both sides knew very well what would happen if an ultimatum were to be implemented." Khrushchev responded that he did not understand how a peace treaty could be regarded by the American people as a "threat to peace." Eisenhower admitted that the situation in Berlin was "abnormal" and that "human affairs got very badly tangled at times." Khrushchev came away with the impression that a deal was possible over Berlin, and they agreed to continue the dialogue at a summit in Paris in the spring of 1960. Khrushchev felt that he got respect and recognition from Eisenhower, who made him believe he was the greatest Soviet statesman since Stalin. In Moscow propagandists applauded Khrushchev's personal diplomacy as the dynamic basis of Soviet foreign policy.

In October 1959 Khrushchev went to Beijing, to take part in the tenth-anniversary celebrations of the People's Republic of China. Mao Zedong and

Berlin is the testicles of the West. . . . Every time I want to make the West scream, I squeeze on Berlin.

— Nikita Khrushchev,
November 1958

the Chinese leadership were deeply insulted that Khrushchev came to China following a visit to the United States and not the other way around. Khrushchev, still glowing with the aura of his US tour, was beginning to believe he was infallible. However, since his denunciation of Stalin in 1956, the Chinese had grown cold to his leadership of the Communist world. As long as Stalin was alive Mao had deferred to Soviet leadership, but he had little time for Khrushchev. Mao thought his Marxism-Leninism was going soft and he was far too close to the Western imperialists. Now the Chinese leadership stormily accused Khrushchev of putting his relationship with the United States above his commitment to the Sino-Soviet alliance. After one particularly intense session of disagreement, Khrushchev shouted at foreign minister Chen Yi, "Don't give me your hand, because I won't shake it!" The minister riposted that Khrushchev's anger did not scare him. "Don't you try to spit on us," Khrushchev countered. "You haven't got enough spit." Khrushchev left Beijing furious. He had received more respect from Eisenhower, the leader of his enemies, than from his supposed comrades. But Chinese pressure on Khrushchev to display his credentials as leader of the worldwide socialist cause, and to take a hard-line stand, was an important influence on the behaviour of the Soviet premier throughout the years of crisis over Berlin.

The Paris summit that was to have resolved the Berlin question disintegrated before it began in the fallout from Gary Powers's failed U-2 spy flight. Khrushchev, ears still stinging from China's criticisms, now destroyed bridges he had built with the United States. Soviet-US relations once more took a turn for the worse.

Those most disappointed by Khrushchev's climbdown were the East Germans. Detailed preparations for a re-unification of Berlin now had to be put on hold. And the flood of citizens westward continued unabated; 144,000 in 1959, nearly 200,000 in 1960. The East German economy was being bled to death. Ulbricht again pressed Khrushchev to demand recognition for the GDR, and a peace treaty. The Soviet leader played for time; Ulbricht would set the pace in the next phase.

Kennedy Enters the Picture

Khrushchev followed the American presidential election campaign of 1960 closely. Having fallen out with Eisenhower, he backed the Democrats and was delighted when John Fitzgerald Kennedy was elected. Khrushchev seemed to believe that he would get along well with Kennedy; he dropped several hints that this presidency could usher in a new era in superpower relations. The two leaders agreed on an early summit in Vienna, only four months after Kennedy took office. A few weeks beforehand, Yuri Gagarin became the first man in space, and just days after that, the CIA-backed invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs proved a fiasco, leaving Kennedy badly bruised. By this time, Khrushchev had come to think of Kennedy's youth and inexperience as serious weaknesses. He decided to take the initiative and, under pressure from Ulbricht, once more to squeeze on Berlin.

The two leaders met at the beginning of June. There was no clear agenda. On the first day they spoke about the world in general and about issues of war,

peace, and revolution, failing to connect on almost any level. A Russian historian has written that Khrushchev had then "the complete confidence of a man riding on the crest of history." Kennedy was astonished at how strongly the Soviet leader came at him. At the end of the first day, aides of Khrushchev asked his opinion of Kennedy as a statesman. Khrushchev waved his hand dismissively, saying that Kennedy was no match for Eisenhower.

On the second day, the two men got around to the subject of Berlin. Khrushchev demanded a peace treaty and recognition for East Germany. Berlin was to become "strictly neutral"; the Western powers could have access



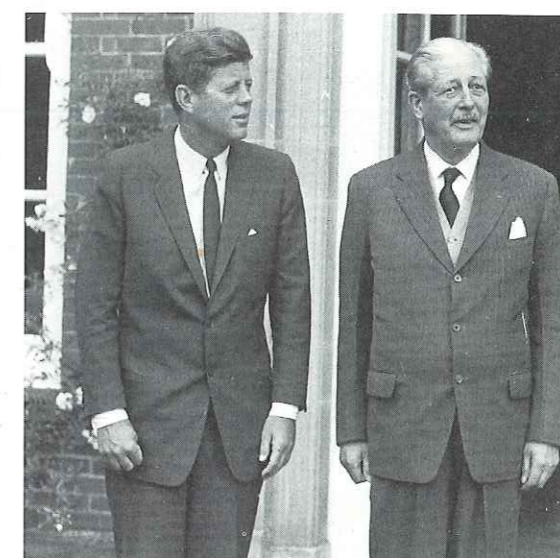
China's Mao Zedong escorts his guest, Nikita Khrushchev, to the airport at the end of a tense visit in October 1959. The Chinese resented Khrushchev's overtures to the West, and did not hesitate to tell him so.



to the city only with East German permission. Any violation of East German territory would be regarded as an act of aggression against the Soviet Union. The United States would have to withdraw by the end of the year. Kennedy was amazed. He said that the Western powers were in Berlin not on sufferance but as of right, having defeated Germany in the Second World War. He declared that the national security of the United States was directly linked to that of Berlin. Khrushchev exploded. "I want peace, but if you want war that is your problem," he shouted, banging his fist on the table. The meeting ended, ominously, with Khrushchev threatening Kennedy with the calamitous consequences of war. He announced that his decision to sign a peace treaty with East Germany in six months was irrevocable. Kennedy responded gloomily, "If that's true, it's going to be a cold winter." Neither man smiled as they shook hands for the official photographs. The two leaders never met again.

Kennedy was badly shaken by the encounter. He had been warned that Khrushchev was likely to talk tough but not that he would demand American surrender. He could scarcely believe that before even settling in at the White House he was faced with the prospect of a nuclear war. A newsman who saw him just as he left the summit said he looked "shaken and angry." Kennedy stopped in London on the way home, and Prime Minister Macmillan observed that he "seemed rather stunned — baffled would perhaps be fairer." The two men discussed the possibility of defeat in the Cold War. On his return to

BELOW LEFT: President John F. Kennedy with Khrushchev at the Vienna summit, where the Soviet leader gave him a hard time. BELOW: In London, on his way home, Kennedy told British prime minister Harold Macmillan that he feared losing the Cold War.



Two leaders get each other's measure, according to Joseph Parish in the Chicago Tribune.

I have heard it said that West Berlin is militarily untenable. . . . Any spot is tenable if men — brave men — will make it so. . . . We cannot and will not permit the Communists to drive us out of Berlin. . . . The endangered frontier of freedom runs through divided Berlin.

— John F. Kennedy,
25 July 1961

The City of Berlin officially certifies that Erich Honecker is a victim of fascism, not a collaborator, and clears him to be politically active in the de-Nazified city.



Washington, Kennedy ordered senior staff at the National Security Council, the State Department, the Pentagon, and the CIA to immerse themselves in the Berlin question and to come up with options for American policy — urgently.

As the summer wore on, the heat increased. Khrushchev announced a substantial increase in his military budget, and a resumption of nuclear testing. At a press conference in Berlin, Ulbricht talked tough, but he commented that “no one intends to build a wall.” Even broaching the idea provoked a flood of more than a thousand East Germans a day to cross the border, putting further pressure on Khrushchev for a resolution.

Government opinion in the United States was divided; hard-liners argued that caving in over Berlin would be to lose the Cold War; soft-liners wanted to avoid overreacting and urged further dialogue with Moscow. As refugees still arrived in vast numbers at the West Berlin reception centres, Kennedy retired for the weekend of 22–23 July to Hyannis Port on the Massachusetts coast. There, in the family beach house, he studied all the latest position papers and reviewed the options. It was time to make his position clear, and he worked hard on a speech to be delivered on nationwide television the night of 25 July.

Kennedy reiterated that the United States was not looking for a fight and that he recognized the “Soviet Union’s historical concerns about their security in central and eastern Europe.” He said he was willing to renew talks. But he announced that he would ask Congress for an additional \$3.25 billion for military spending, mostly on conventional weapons. He wanted six new divisions for the army and two for the marines, and he announced plans to triple the draft and to call up the reserves. Kennedy proclaimed, “We seek peace, but we shall not surrender.”

The response to his speech was, in the main, positive. Army recruiting stations reported a dramatic increase in enlistments. But the president’s warning that a stronger civil defence programme was needed to minimize losses in the event of nuclear attack provoked immense anxiety. Local civil defence offices were besieged with enquiries about air-raid shelters, and the sale of prefabricated home shelters boomed. Major municipalities carried out surveys of public buildings to find suitable fallout shelters. They began to test air-raid sirens regularly.

Vacationing in the Black Sea resort of Sochi, Khrushchev was furious when he heard of Kennedy’s speech. He invited John Jay McCloy, Kennedy’s disarmament adviser, who happened to be in the Soviet Union, to join him. He shouted at McCloy that Kennedy’s military buildup was tantamount to a declaration of war against the Soviet Union. If the Americans wanted war, Khrushchev bellowed, they could have it. But if there was a nuclear war over Berlin, Kennedy would be America’s last president. In Berlin, the flood of refugees became a torrent.

An Old Plan Implemented

When Khrushchev’s fury abated he realized he would have to climb down once again. Intelligence reports indicated that Kennedy’s threats to use his nuclear arsenal were no bluff. He had warned Kennedy, “Only a madman would start a war over Berlin,” and now this applied to himself. But there was



ABOVE: Caught on the wrong side as barriers divide Berlin on 14 August 1961, an East German resident tries to get back home. ABOVE RIGHT: Workmen move in to build a more permanent wall, replacing barbed wire with concrete blocks.

still the problem of East Germany’s population drain. Plans to build a wall to surround West Berlin and stop the exodus had been made many years earlier. No one in the Kremlin liked the idea of fencing off West Berlin; it reflected badly on the Communist way of life. Nevertheless, Ulbricht was called to Moscow. At a secret meeting of Warsaw Pact leaders he was told to go ahead and prepare to close the border with a wall. He appointed Erich Honecker, a loyal party man, to head the team that would do it.

Meanwhile, signals were coming from Washington that the United States would not interfere with their closing borders to stem the refugee outflow, so



long as West Berlin was left intact. The president in his television speech had spoken only about defending West Berlin, not the whole city. Kennedy told his aide Walt Rostow, “I can hold the [Western] alliance together to defend West Berlin, but I cannot act to keep East Berlin open.”

In the early hours of Sunday, 13 August 1961, Berliners were awakened by the clatter and clanking of military vehicles and the noise of barbed-wire coils and concrete posts being unloaded in the streets. Late-night revellers unexpectedly found the S-Bahn railway system closed, for trains were no longer crossing the border. On Bernauer Strasse, where the border between the French and Soviet sectors ran down the middle of the road, a line of army trucks gathered on the eastern side of the street, their headlights blazing, as workmen started to erect barbed-wire barricades. At Potsdamer Platz, the busiest of all the East-West crossing points, men with pneumatic drills began to pierce cobblestone streets and set in place concrete pillars.

The light of dawn revealed that East German workers, under armed guard, were slowly erecting a barbed-wire fence that zigzagged its way through the city, strictly following the borders of the American, British, and French military sectors. The fence ran down the middle of streets, it even bisected cemeteries. As the first East Berliners turned up, as usual, to go to their work in West Berlin, they were turned back. “Die Grenze ist geschlossen,” they were told; “The border is closed.” Bewildered, they were dispersed by the police. As the morn-