CHAPTER V

BERLIN CRISIS AND THE GERMAN QUESTION
1. INTRODUCTION

The basic objective in this chapter is to analyze the sharp twists and turns of the Soviet policy on Berlin crisis. At the end of the War the city of Berlin was artificially divided along with the division of Germany as if it was a state within a state. Berlin as such became a hot bed of the Cold War at least till the closing days of 1961. It was the Berlin crisis which brought Khrushchev and Kennedy face to face. The former wanted German peace treaty, must precede any agreement on Germany and Berlin. For the latter it was through the exercise of a free and fair choice of the people of Germany as a whole that any solution of the German Question was possible and permissible.

The city of Berlin, therefore, became a test ground of Kennedy's 'endurance' and Khrushchev's 'will power' so much so that the world at one point of time was brought to the brink of nuclear holocaust. In this chapter we will see the clash of Kennedy's confidence and Khrushchev's craftsmanship. In fact, throughout the period under discussion in this chapter it was the Soviet leadership that made the Western powers to dance to the tune of their fast changing diplomatic ballets.

2. ORIGIN OF THE CRISIS

The origin of the Berlin crisis of 1961 dates back to the time of World War II. As we have seen in the preceding chapters, Germany's defeat followed its division into four zones of administrations. Each of them was placed under
the supervision of one of the four War-time allies. The city of Berlin too was vertically divided among the victors of the war on the same pattern, "despite the fact that it was entirely surrounded by territory assigned to the Soviet Zone of Administration and lay some 110 miles east of the zones administered by the Western Allies".1

Consequently, the city had to face a unique situation. Firstly, it was divided. Second, a part of the city was artificially integrated into the West German economic system, without locating logically viable legal sovereignty, despite the fact that the governing Mayor of the West Berlin was "accorded the honours due heads of the government"2 whenever he traveled abroad. The Soviet Union always resisted recognizing West Berlin as a part of West Germany. At the most the Soviet leaders were constrained to consider West Berlin "a state within a state, the third political state formation on the German soil"3; something like a city-state as the Vatican.

The city of Berlin was accorded quadripartite administrative status way back in 1944 when it was chosen to be the seat of the allied Control machinery in Germany within the framework of Soviet occupation zone. However, no sooner was the war over than the city of Berlin became an apple of discord for War Allied themselves. On June 16, 1948, the US Commandant, Col. Frank Howley unilaterally decided to withdraw from the Berlin Allied Kommandatura

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3. Ibid.
making it virtually dysfunctional. The Western powers tried later in December 1948 to replace the Berlin Kommandatura with a West Berlin Kommandatura. At about the same time a split was engineered in the Berlin House of Representatives with a view to set up a separate set of municipal government in the Western occupied sectors of Berlin city. By December 5, 1948, the division of the city was duly legitimized through hurriedly held elections in these sectors.

Interestingly, when the division of Germany was formalized in 1949 the soviet leadership stopped "any discussion of the long nonexistent Greater Berlin". For the Soviet side "the only question now open to examination" were those related to the "West Berlin and the improvement of the situation in and around it".

As the city of Berlin, the pre-War capital of the undefeated and undivided Germany, was situated inside the Soviet occupied zone, it was designated as the capital of the newly established GDR. Also, as the West Berlin was firmly occupied by the Western Allied powers, the part of Berlin designated as the GDR's capital meant, for all practical purposes, the East Berlin alone.

Here comes the peculiar situation in the life of a nation, a city and in international politics as such. The Western part of the city was artificially severed from its natural settings.

Needless to emphasize, this was, an embarrassing situation for the Soviet Union. But the Soviet leadership did try to explain its reconciliatory position by stating that it "agreed to allow West Berlin to exist as an enclave with its own

4. Ibid., p.7.
5. Ibid.

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state and political structure inside the socialist community in order to reduce tension and strengthen European security” 6.

Nevertheless, the Soviet Union's discomfort vis-a-vis Berlin Question came to the fore in November 1958 when Khrushchev demanded in no uncertain terms that "a German peace treaty be signed within six months" 7. However, the deadline so fixed was conveniently ignored. We will see later that it was the Berlin Crisis which brought the world on the brink of an all-out nuclear war during the second half of the year 1961. The Soviet Union was one of the principal actors of the power-game played inside and outside Berlin. It is also true that most often "the ground rules of the game and its principal phases were determined by the Soviet leadership" 8 who seem to have initiated the crisis at the time of their own deliberate choice, prolonged it at their own convenience and beat a retreat when they found their adversaries relentless, firm and fighting fit. Basically, it was a power game being played between the two mutually antagonistic military alliances—NATO and Warsaw Pact.

Interestingly, while the Soviet leadership did not fail to maintain formal diplomatic relations with West Germany, obviously of course, to keep the dialogue on in order to influence the West German policies towards the German Question.

As a result the Soviet leadership was successful in implanting an everlasting impression in all German minds, the West Germans in particular.

6. Ibid., p.8.
7. Slusser, n.1, p.xi.
8. Ibid., p.1.
that the "key to Germany's fate-eventual reunification or the final formalization of division was held by the Soviet Union". This was indeed true to a large extent for two obvious reasons: first, in the post-World War II territorial arrangements in the Europe the Soviet Union established its own say, and secondly, by the end of the World War II the Soviet Union emerged as one of the arbiters of balance of powers in Europe and the World.

3. THE SOVIET OBJECTIVE

Nevertheless, the Soviet objective regarding Berlin was laud and clear. The Soviet Union wanted to bring West Berlin out of the West German claim. The Soviet foreign Ministry protest notes of June 8, 1961 to the three Western powers denouncing West German plan to hold a session of the Bundesrat, the upper house of the FRG legislature, in West Berlin of June 16, 1961, was a clear cut move in this direction. The notes dubbed the West German plan as a serious and obvious provocation against the Soviet Union. "The West Berlin is located on the territory of the German Democratic Republic", the notes continued, "and by general agreement, has never formed and does not form part of the FRG". This is worth noting here that it was way back in 1959 when the Soviet government for the first time launched a vocal protest against any meeting of this kind in Berlin.

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The West Germany, however, promptly rejected the Soviet protest by saying that such meetings were "in full accord with the four-power status of Berlin and the constitutional links between the Federal Republic and Berlin." But Khrushchev at this juncture was in no mood to entertain such argument. Rather he stressed an urgent need for a peace treaty with Germany. He was emphatic on this issue: "The conclusion of a peace treaty with Germany cannot be put off any longer, a peace settlement in Europe must be achieved in Europe this year." Khrushchev, most probably, wanted to use the issue of peace treaty with Germany and the Berlin issue as a proof to convince the Western powers that the existing international balance of power had a distinct tilt towards the USSR. For GDR and for Walter Ulbricht himself, nonetheless, the conclusion of German peace treaty meant leaving the Western powers with no other option but to negotiate with the GDR directly over any issue related to West Berlin. Therefore, if at all the GDR was interested in the conclusion of peace treaty with Germany, it was because it wanted to absorb the Western Sectors of Berlin. Otherwise, Ulbricht was rather more interested in enhancing the GDR's prestige in international arena and consolidating his regime at the domestic front than dueling on the international aspects and implications of the Berlin issue.

Interestingly, while Ulbricht kept his eye "fixed on definite target - absorption of the Western sectors of Berlin", Khrushchev kept on maintaining in


no uncertain terms: "We propose giving West Berlin the status of a free city." \(^\text{13}\)

President Kennedy at around the same time, on the other hand was busy in trying to put a united Western alliance front against the Soviet Union on Berlin issue. Soon after his meeting with Khrushchev in Vienna Kennedy flew to London to meet with Harold Macmillan, the then British Prime Minister in April, 1961. Despite Prime Minister Harold Macmillan's personal inclination for negotiations and an attitude of non-confrontation with the Soviet leaders on any international issues, Kennedy succeeded in cajoling him to confer in a joint communique issued at the end of the meeting: "The situation in regard to Germany was reviewed and there was full agreement on the necessity of maintaining the rights and obligations of the allied government in Berlin." \(^\text{14}\)

On June 27, 1961, Macmillan reiterating his stand on Berlin question said:

Her Majesty's government, in concert with their allies, have over the years made a number of comprehensive proposals for the just and equitable solution of the problem of Germany and Berlin... All these proposals have been rejected by the Soviet Government, who prefer instead to manufacture an artificial crisis for the purpose of gaining their own ends. We and our allies have certain obligations in Germany, and we do not intend to abandon them. Among these obligations is the preservation of the freedom of the people of West Berlin." \(^\text{15}\)

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This is worth noting here that Macmillan emphatically dubbed Berlin issue as an 'artificial crisis'. The obvious Implication being that such Soviet overtures needed not to be taken seriously.

Contrary to Macmillan's assessment of the situation in Berlin the French President de Gaulle at about the same time was making almost desperate appeal: "Clouds are piling up over Europe. It is time for the West to close ranks." 16

Taking cue from Prime Minister Macmillan, President Kennedy back home described the Berlin crisis as 'soviet manufactured and spelled out the Soviet objectives in Berlin as three-folds: first, "to make permanent the partition of Germany", second, to "bring an end to Allied rights in West Berlin; and finally, manipulate the existing situation in a way that "the rights of the citizens of West Berlin"17 were to be finished.

4. THE WESTERN VIEW:

Therefore, the Western Allies, Britain and the US in particular, considered the Berlin Crisis not a problem but a pretext. Since there was no concrete problem; it was an exercise in futility to sit across the table with the USSR to negotiate. "Since there was nothing to negotiate, willingness on our part to go to conference table would be taken in Moscow as evidence of Weakness and make the crisis so much the worse."18

Moreover, the prevalent impression about Khrushchev in America and the rest of the West was that he was, perhaps, convinced that the West was not to risk an all-out nuclear war on such issues. This was, according to Acheson, a wrong signal to Soviets. In his report as the head of a 'Task Force', which was established at the directive of president Kennedy shortly after he returned from Vienna, the former US Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, made a pointed remark that the Soviet leadership be made to know in no uncertain terms the resolution of the Western allies that they would, if at all needed, risk an all out nuclear war if Khrushchev did not alter his purpose substantially. It was at this juncture that the Acheson Report "helped fix the debate for a time in terms of a clear-cut choice between negotiation and a military showdown."\(^{19}\) In order to convince Khrushchev of the US seriousness, Acheson emphatically recommended that the President Kennedy should declare a national emergency so that the American troops be put on a state of battle preparedness.

President Kennedy found the Acheson recommendations a bit emotional. He picked up rational portions of the Acheson report and decided to go slow on the middle path. He favoured the policy of negotiation. But he decided to negotiate with the Soviets from a position of strength. This was why he did recognize the need for hastening the building up of substantial Western military presence in Berlin and West Germany, "not only in order to convince the Soviets of Western firmness but to avoid the dangerous dilemma posed by the existing

\(^{19}\) Schlesinger, n.18, p.385.
US and NATO contingency plans for Berlin."^{20}

Khrushchev, on the other hand, was satisfied as he believed that the Soviet Union not merely had parity in military might with the West, it also enjoyed moral superiority: "We consider the forces of socialism and peace a good deal mightier than the forces of imperialism and War."^{21} To him it was just not enough that the Soviet bloc had parity of economic and military power with the West but much more than that their cause was righteous - the cause of peace and peaceful co-existence and the cause of peaceful solution of all issues in relations between states. Khrushchev therefore, considered conclusion of a German peace treaty as "the most peaceful of peaceful solutions."^{22}

5. THE DEADLOCK

It was here that the deadlock persisted. The Western alliance sought to find solution of the German Question through all-German free and fair elections. They said that people of Germany as a whole themselves should decide their fate. Khrushchev, on the other hand, insisted that the solution of the German Question must be sought through "direct negotiations between the two German governments."^{23}

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20. Slusser, n.1, p.34.
22. Ibid.
Here it is very interesting to note that when looked at the policy positions taken by the two mutually antagonistic power blocs, it seems obvious that Western bloc would like to see German people themselves deciding their fate by exercising their free will, and the communist Soviet bloc would like to repose their faith in the state thereby allow the two German states themselves to negotiate the modus operandi of the reunification as and when they wished.

But if one were to look for deeper meaning hidden beneath the formal postures, one would find that it was not really the clash of ideologies but the clash of calculations between the two power blocs. The Western insistence for all German elections to decide on reunification, it seems, was based on the crude numerical calculation. Since West Germans were in a position to outnumber East Germans in an event of one-man-one-vote, the Western alliance wanted to go by the principle of equality of the people of two Germanies as a whole. But the Soviet bloc were insistent on equality of the two German states. To them the reunification of the FRG and the GDR was to "be achieved only as a result of negotiations and cooperation between the governments of these states themselves". 24

But again, as regarding West Berlin, Khrushchev appeared to be a sensible and reasonable democrat: "I want to say once more that West Berlin will have the social and economic order its population wishes." 25 Here too, Khrushchev had design of his own. In fact, he wanted Western powers to

24. CDSP, XIII/26, p.12, quoted in Slusser, n.1, p.42.
25. Ibid.
recognize GDR's right to control the access routes to the city of Berlin. He made his intention very clear when he said:

"West Berlin will be able to maintain free relations with all states at its own discretion. But since the communications to the West Berlin run through the territory of the German Democratic Republic, according to established international traditions and laws an agreement with the government of that state is required for making use of them." 26

It is really very interesting to note here that Khrushchev always emphasized that any solutions to German Question must be preceded by a 'peace treaty with Germany.' By 'a peace treaty with Germany' he precisely meant concluding "a peace treaty with the two German states." 27

By the beginning of July 1961, Khrushchev started threatening the West with direct nuclear offensive if they did even dare to hinder in any way the Soviet plan of unilateral peace treaty with Germany. By Germany he obviously meant the GDR first and, perhaps, then persuade, convince or cajole the FRG to conclude a peace treaty with the USSR. In such a situation, the established "four-power responsibilities" over Germany was to come to an end automatically which, in turn, was to give the USSR a diplomatic monopoly in dealing with the West vis-a-vis Germany.

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27. Ibid.
6. **THE CHINA CARD**

The tragedy with Khrushchev at this juncture was that he had to compete with Mao to coexist with the West. Co-existence with the West was, in turn, termed as appeasement of the 'Western imperialism.' Therefore, Khrushchev was caught between the 'devil and the deep sea.' In order to overcome this dilemma Khrushchev had to prove himself tough and decisive. Moreover, Khrushchev had to compete with his fellow comrades for leadership back home as he himself initiated the concept of collective leadership in order to refute Stalin's style of functioning.

Therefore, the need to compete with his opponents back home and "the need to compete with Mao for leadership in the communist camp,"\(^{28}\) compelled Khrushchev to take tough stand on Berlin. In fact, Khrushchev's ostensibly rigid diplomatic stand directed against West was in reality aimed at China as well. At the same time, he was anxious not to indulge in actual war with the West, perhaps, not even a limited conventional war because, in no case he could afford to endanger Soviet Union" interests.

Khrushchev, thus, at the moment was forced to walk on a tight rope. He had to constantly contest against China for maintaining allegiance of communist parties of, Europe, Latin America, Asia and Africa. At the same time he had to bargain with the West in order to establish ideological hegemony the world over. And in no case he could afford to get rid of German Question and the question

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28. Quoted in Slusser, n.1, p.75.
of Berlin. He had to go on building up pressure against the West on German Question but, here too, he could not afford to over-reach himself.

Interestingly, to the Soviet Union's strategic advantage, "while informed observers and analysts were increasingly aware, by early July, 1961, of the deepening split between Soviet Russia and China, official US policy continued to be predicted on the absolute concept of Soviet, Chinese solidarity". 29 The US policy-makers were so obsessed with the stereo-typed monolithic picture of the "Sino-Soviet empire" that they "did not begin to accept the reality and possible finality of the Sino-Soviet split until the early weeks of 1962". 30

7. HOLOCAUST OR HUMILIATION

On 25 July, 1961, President Kennedy in his Address to Nation made a real and effective reply to the repeated Soviet offensives against the Western alliance on the issue of Germany and the status of Berlin. Kennedy was very specific and firm in outlining his administrative, military, diplomatic and financial measures in order to meet the Soviet challenge on Berlin and the rest of the world. The US response to the Soviet challenge was basically military rather than diplomatic, although the Kennedy administration was striving hard from the very outset to achieve an over all flexible military manoeuvrability so that at the time of real threat to US interests "the President would not be limited to a


stark choice between 'holocaust and humiliation'." Thus, the US administration at this juncture was rather desperate to expand the range of readily available diplomatic as well as military options so that it might not be forced to face humiliation or go for all-out nuclear war.

8. MEND OR END SITUATION

Kennedy's 25 July speech heralded a new era of balance of power relationship between the Western alliance system and the Soviet bloc despite the fact that the basic power balance between the USSR and the US remained completely unchanged. The promptness with which the administrative, military and diplomatic follow-ups were initiated following Kennedy's speech of July 25, "marked the end of the period in which Khrushchev and his associates had been able to base Soviet foreign policy on inflated claims of military superiority over, or even parity with, the West." Khrushchev did respond sharply and immediately to Kennedy's speech but the actual follow up of Soviet moves implicitly reflected the beginning of the end of an era of the Soviet Union's sharply worded offensive statements directed at the US and the West.

It is, indeed, interesting to note the changing pattern of Khrushchev's reaction to Kennedy's speech of 25 July. There was an initial violent outburst. Then came some threatening remarks followed by a relatively calm, cool and

31. Slusser, n.1, p.81.
32. Slusser, n.1, p.88.
friendly advise: "if war occurred, he (Kennedy) would be the last President". 33

Here, it would be pertinent to describe an interesting event that took place on the same evening that Kennedy made his often quoted 25 July speech. On the same evening, the chief US negotiator in the bilateral talks on disarmament, John J. McCloy, met Khrushchev at his dacha in Sochi on latter's invitation 34. The meeting "took place in a friendly atmosphere". 35. The talks in this meeting obviously centred around the subject of disarmament and the US-USSR relations. In fact, the immediate purpose of Khrushchev's such a rare accommodative gesture in showing hospitality towards McCloy was to inform him of the concessions in disarmament negotiation the Soviet Union was prepared to make to reciprocate Kennedy's goodwill gesture shown to the Soviet representative a few weeks back. The Soviet draft document on disarmament proposed:

"Both sides reaffirm their resolve, until a treaty on general and complete disarmament is concluded, to refrain from acts which may increase international tension and to strive to the end that all international disputes may be solved by peaceful means alone, through negotiation". 36.

Here, two things should be taken into account in retrospect before proceeding further. One, the aforesaid draft proposal was getting prepared under the long drawn static and linear impression of the Soviet leadership that the

33. Schlesinger, n.18, p.392.
West would not run the risk of war against the USSR on the German Question in general and the Berlin issue in particular. It might protest though. Two, by the time the draft document on disarmament was getting prepared and submitted Khrushchev was not in the know of the actual content of the text of Kennedy's speech of 25 July. It was only "by the evening of the 26th (July) the early hours of the 27th" that Khrushchev could read, perhaps, the monitored report of the Voice of America broadcast of a Russian translation of Kennedy's speech. Incidentally this broadcast "was not Jammed" by Russians. Khrushchev became emotional after going through the text of Kennedy's speech. He told McCloy that "the United States had declared preliminary war on the Soviet Union." Then quickly he recollects his cool and softens his tone and says: "... he still believed in the President's good sense. After thunderstorms, people cooled off, thought problems over and resumed human shape." But he did not at the same time forget to remind McCloy of "Soviet ability to build and deliver by rocket on US territory a hundred-megaton bomb." Putting off the draft proposals on disarmament prepared and submitted the other day, Khrushchev assertively told McCloy that no substantial agreement on disarmament could be

37. Slusser, n.1, P.90
40. Ibid.
reached without "a satisfactory solution of the Berlin question" 42.

9. THE SEALING OFF OF WEST BERLIN

When Kennedy in his speech of 25 July made it profoundly clear that if he was forced by the Soviet leadership to choose between 'holocaust and humiliation' on Berlin issue and the broader issue of Germany as a whole he would opt for holocaust come what may, Khrushchev was put on defensive. Indeed he was put to choose between the maximum Soviet objective of "inflicting a major diplomatic defeat on the Western powers by forcing them to accept the fait accompli of a Soviet-East German peace treaty, bringing with it the end of Western occupation rights in West Berlin" 43 and the minimum objective of supporting the East German regime "by shutting off the escape route via West Berlin." 44

If his meeting with McCloy on 27 July is closely monitored one finds that Khrushchev was not at all in a mood to go for the aforesaid maximum Soviet objective primarily because the Soviet Union in the given contemporary international scenario and domestic situation could not afford to match Kennedy's stakes raised in his speech of 25 July. At the same time, Khrushchev was continuously being pressurized by the East German regime to use 'all

42. Ibid.
43. Slusser, n.1, P. 93.
44. Ibid.
means' "to stop the drain of refugees to the West." Khrushchev decided to go for the second objective, i.e., sealing of West Berlin.

On 7 August, 1961 Khrushchev made the official Soviet reply to Kennedy's speech of 25 July through a television address. If seen retrospectively, the main purpose of Khrushchev's reply to Kennedy's speech was "to warn the West against using force to prevent the Soviets and their East German allies from carrying out their plan to seal off West Berlin" during the coming several days. In his television address Khrushchev did accept publicly, probably for the first time, that "the basic issue in the Berlin crisis was the question of national prestige." Now he had to decide a course of action which would neither be a compromise on the national prestige of the Soviet Union nor would dilute the Soviet claims of the world communist leadership and at the same time, would not raise the Soviet claim vis-a-vis Berlin and German Question that would risk an all-out nuclear war. Hence he considered it wiser to settle for the minimum Soviet objective of sealing off West Berlin. The Soviet leadership's decision to go for the minimum without any risk was amply indicated in Khrushchev's television address of August 7 when he theorized: "In our socialist country the interests of the people and the interests of the government are one and indivisible. We are not willing to saddle the people with unnecessary hardships that are not warranted by the needs of the situation."  

47. Slusser, n.1, p.112.
In the light of the aforesaid theoretical paradigm Khrushchev made a soul touching appeal:

"... we once again appeal to the governments of the United States, Britain, and France: Let us sit down as honest men around the conference table, let us clear the atmosphere, let us rely on reason and not on the power of the thermonuclear weapons."

This direct appeal of Khrushchev's for the Western reasonableness was followed by an obsessively determined Soviet resolution of plugging the "loophole" of the West Berlin border. In his speech Khrushchev made it nearly explicit that he was going to exercise his second option of sealing off West Berlin very soon: "we are going to sign a peace treaty and close your loophole into the G.D.R." At the same time he meticulously decided not to match to the US military build-up as envisaged by Kennedy in his speech of 25 July. Rather he went to the extent of declaring that there was "no necessity for (USSR) to earmark additional funds" as he did not intend to exercise military option which was, for all said and done, not viable at that point of time. When seen in retrospect the military option as an effective instrument of diplomacy was, technically speaking, rather not available, neither to the USSR nor to the West without risking mass scale annihilation of civilian population, the loss none of them were prepared to bear with.

49. Slusser, n.1, p.113, citing CDSP, XIII/32, p.20.
50. Quoted in Slusser, n.1, p.111.
51. Ibid., pp.112-113, emphasis original.
Therefore, the actual objective of Khrushchev's television address of August 7 was to apprise the West of the immediate limited strategic move he had decided to undertake vis-à-vis the Berlin issue. He wanted, in fact, the West to be psychologically prepared for accepting his forthcoming action of sealing off West Berlin as the fait accompli. At the same time he wanted to warn the West "against intervention in Berlin to halt the impending border closure." 52 Nevertheless, as we shall see later, the events that followed almost immediately after the Soviet venture of sealing off Berlin brought the world almost on the brink of an all-out nuclear war.

10. THE ALLIANCE ON ANVIL

Although Kennedy did try to keep his alliance partners informed of every American move against the Soviet Union, the Western alliance nations, in particular, the U.K. and France did find themselves under pressure at this point of time. Although Kennedy administration had provided the Western ambassadors with the text of Kennedy's speech of 25 July well in advance 53 and secured their favourable 54 response, for "a number of reasons the British and French were unable or unwilling to meet American wishes in this regard." 55 On the contrary, the British government was thinking of "reducing the size of its

53. Slusser, n.1, p.115.
55. Slusser, n.1, p.115.
forces in Germany" as it was undergoing a serious financial crisis at the
domestic front. Instead of showing solidarity with President Kennedy for his
latest offensive against the Soviet Union on Berlin issue, the British Prime
Minister, Macmillan, chose to flatter Khrushchev by saying: "Everyone knows
that Mr Khrushchev is a strong leader. What we're wondering is whether he can
prove to be a statesman too." 57

The French, on the other hand, were greatly annoyed with Americans and
the English for adopting carrot and stick policy on Berlin issue vis-a-vis the
Soviet Union. General de Gaulle straight away refused to buy any idea of
possible negotiation with the Soviets "in the face of what he regarded as
Khrushchev's exorbitant and inflexible demands." 58

The West German government's aversion against any Western move for
negotiation with Khrushchev was but obvious. It was the West Germans who had
to bear the brunt of any diplomatic step taken in wrong direction by the Western
alliance partners. Quite obviously, therefore, the West German government
"strongly endorsed the French resistance to negotiations." 59

Nevertheless, Kennedy kept the door for negotiations with the Soviets
wide open. At the press conference on 10 August, "the flickering hopes for
negotiations were carefully nursed back to life by Kennedy." 60 Responding to

56. Ibid.

p.116.

58. Slusser, n.1, p.117.

59. Ibid.

60. Ibid., p.118.
Khrushchev's 7 August appeal for peaceful solution to Berlin and the German Question, Kennedy did try to make it amply clear that the US government was willing to employ every diplomatic means for the peaceful solution of this issue. At the 10 August news conference when his attention was drawn towards the possibility of the sealing off of west Berlin by the Soviet and the East German regimes, he "indicated no concern over the possibility and no plans to meet it if it occurred."\(^{61}\)

Thus, Kennedy's willingness to negotiate a peaceful solution of the Berlin crisis and to do everything possible to avoid war proved to be much needed soft signal to Khrushchev to go ahead with his plan to seal off Berlin only two and a half day away. On 11 August, the East German legislature unanimously approved "certain unspecified" measures to plug the escape route for refugees to the West.

11. THE BERLIN WALL

Shortly after mid-night on August 13 a barbed-wire barrier\(^{62}\) started coming up all along the border cutting off West Berlin from the East. The two most immediate objectives of the erection of physical barriers across the city of Berlin and the subsequent East German regulations there of were "to seal off West Berlin from the eastern sector of the city and from East Germany and to

61. Ibid., p.119.

62. Initially it was merely a barbed-wire obstacle and not a concrete wall that was erected on Sunday 13 August 1961. Gradually the barbed-wire barriers were replaced by a concrete Wall better known later as the 'Berlin Wall'.

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prevent the inhabitants of East Germany from entering West Berlin."

However, the GDR quickly maintained that the new measures being taken were of temporary nature and would remain in operation only until the conclusion of a German peace treaty.

It is worth mentioning here that it was the East German militarized police units which carried out the actual sealing off the border. They were, of course, backed up by the Soviet military formations present in Germany at that time in case there were any attempts by the East German population to thwart the operation or any possible Western military resistance.

Be that as it may, the very act of the erection of the Wall was a real turning point in the Berlin crisis. Khrushchev had decisively scored a point against the West for two simple reasons: first, Berlin now no longer remained a crisis point in the Soviet strategic consideration as the flight of the East Germans to West Berlin was getting substantially checked. Khrushchev was now relieved of the East German pressure of immediate action to stop East German emigration, moreover, he succeeded in taking a lead in drawing a battle-line in Europe after the World War II. Before the War it was Hitler versus the rest of the world; now it was the Soviet Union versus the West. If the War symbolized the test of the people's will, choice and determination to preserve democracy against the onslaught of the fascism, the Wall now symbolized the clear-cut division of the world between the Socialist and the Capitalist camps. The Wall also symbolized the virtual end of the era of 'peaceful co-existence'. The world had now entered into 'competitive co-existence'.

63. Slusser, n.1, p.131.
Thus, Khrushchev seized initiative from the West. He set an agenda to which the West was made to react and respond for most of the time till socialism itself collapsed in the Soviet Union.

Although the Wall had, in actual reality "served to stabilize a situation which was getting dangerously fluid,"64 the West continued to be seriously apprehensive of the fact that intense tactical confrontations between the Western alliance partners and the Soviet bloc on Berlin issue was still in the offing. Such Western apprehensions of actual military confrontation were intensified for a month or so since the building of the Wall also because of the fact that even "after August 13 the Soviets maintained or even increased their pressure on the West and continued to insist that they intended to sign a peace treaty with the GDR."65

Nevertheless, while the Western leaders were contemplating the actual military confrontations against the USSR since the day Wall was erected, Khrushchev had returned to his vacation retreat in Sochi. Khrushchev's right hand man, Presidium member Anatas Mickoyan had already left for Tokyo on August 12 itself to inaugurate a Soviet trade fair there. In a speech there on August 21 he warned the West apparently from a position of strength: "You may not like the German Democratic Republic. But you will have to ask them for a pass if you want to enter Berlin."66

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65. Slusser, n.1, p.132.

Moreover, the departure of two most prominent Soviet leaders from Moscow at this juncture makes it evidently clear that the Soviet leadership were more than certain that "there was no real risk of international conflict growing out of the Berlin crisis and that the moment of maximum danger was safely past." 67

Nevertheless, the Soviet Union continued the 'pressure compromise-pressure tactics even after building of the Wall just to ensure that the West would not resort to military means in retaliation. Meanwhile, it kept on luring the West in a typical Russian style of showing verbal sincerity and interest in Berlin and German problems through negotiations.

On the other hand, all of a sudden the West found itself caught between 'a devil and the deep sea'. It miserably failed in reacting militarily too, particularly in a situation when two of its major alliance partners - the UK and France - were not pulling on well with the American plan of actions on Berlin and German Question.

All in all, the Western powers were caught off guard and were facing a Hobson's choice. They could neither wage a war against the Soviet Union as none of them was prepared to risk an all-out nuclear war, nor could they negotiate with it from a position of strength. At the same time, keeping quiet too was a serious loss of prestige for them. Moreover, they could not enter into negotiations with the Soviets at this stage as now there was nothing much left to negotiate either. By now "the Soviets had already secured much of what they

67. Slusser, n.1, p.132.
sought in Berlin."\(^{68}\)

The tragedy with the Western powers was that they were unable to frame a common position to counter the Soviet initiatives on Berlin issue effectively as there existed sharply divided views among them on the issue. Thus, the Western powers were in actual reality bewildered in the face of the Soviet offensive in Berlin.

On the whole, the total existing scenario at that time was so intricate, complex and confused that it proved to be a watershed in the history of Soviet-Western relations.

12. THE WESTERN PROTEST

Taking into account the divergence of opinion among the Western alliance partners on Berlin and the German problem, the US could not afford to react militarily against the building of the Berlin Wall. That was why the then US Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, chose to underplay the basic gravity of the situation arising out of the building of the Wall in Berlin. In his carefully calculated statement on August 13 mid-day, Rusk said "the authorities in East Berlin and East Germany" had denied "to their own people access to West Berlin."\(^{69}\) Interestingly, he did not blame the USSR for its role in the building of the Wall. He did make a route and a ritual sort of protest by stating that the Wall was built "in direct contravention of the four-power agreement reached at

\(^{68}\) Slusser, n.1, p.134.

\(^{69}\) Quoted in Slusser, n.1, p.135.
Paris on June, 1949."

But from a strictly legal point of view it was the East German government which built a wall on its own territory and the Western powers had no valid legal ground to contest against East Germans on this issue. Moreover, there was every likelihood of a massive military response from the Soviet Union, if at all the Western powers had tried to prevent the building of the Wall.

Meanwhile, the Soviets took a subtle diplomatic initiative of cultivating bilateral good will. Just after the Berlin action Andrei Smirnov, the then Soviet ambassador to West Germany, called on the Chancellor Adenauer to convey a message from Khrushchev that the Soviet Union was no longer interested in further intensifying the crisis in Berlin.

Chancellor Adenauer's response was positive. He reportedly assured the Soviet ambassador that the Federal Republic of Germany would do nothing that would "impair good relations with the Soviet Union or endanger international peace.""

Nevertheless, by 17 August the Western allies did manage to lodge a formal protest by calling the Wall-building action as a serious violation of Berlin's quadripartite status. By now Britain and France too tacitly agreed to the US policy of strengthening Western military position in Germany in the face of recent border-sealing action in Berlin. They formally announced their decision of reinforcing military strength in Germany.

70. Ibid.
The East German authorities, on the other hand, promptly took up the second phase of the construction of Wall on August 18 as they were convinced by now that the West would not go further in attempting to stop their operation. Eventually a five-foot concrete Wall dividing the city of Berlin was built and remained there as "an ugly scar across the face of the divided city" till the time it was brought down by the people of the city themselves in 1990.

Up till now, the Berlin Wall operation had been carried on ostensibly by the East German authorities. The Soviet Union did not come forward to claim responsibility or corner credit for the sealing off of West Berlin, although it was an open secret that it were the Soviet authorities who visualized, planned and carried out the whole operation and were still remote controlling actions on Berlin.

Interestingly, it was only on 23 August that the Soviet authorities came openly to blame the West of encouraging, what they called, "revanchists, extremists, saboteurs, and spies" to enter into the city using air lanes from West Germany by "taking advantage of the absence of control over air communication."  

The Western allies lost no time in rebuffing the Soviet authorities on the ground that Soviet charges had no locus standi since postwar four-power agreements on air communications with Berlin put no limitation on the air lanes.

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72. Slusser, n.1, p.139.
73. Slusser, n.1, p.144.
74. Quoted in Slusser, n.1, p.144, emphasis Original.
Moreover, these agreements were signed much before Germany itself got separated into two states. The Western reaction to the Soviet Union’s deliberately designed provocation this time was so sharp and forthcoming that they went to the extent of warning the Soviets of the most serious consequences.

13. THE ACT OF RECONNOITERING

In actual reality, however, the Soviet Union’s latest move was one of its routine acts of reconnoitering the Western mood on Berlin and German Questions. Khrushchev was more than determined not to start a World War over Berlin. Therefore, the Soviet government’s 23 August note was solely directed towards feeling the pulse of the West on the Berlin issue. In the face of the Western readiness to prefer holocaust to humiliation, "Khrushchev took immediate action to stress Soviet willingness to negotiate with the West over the Berlin crisis". 75 Khrushchev, in fact, took a number of steps consciously directed towards bringing back the highly charged situation to the normal. He got his interview planned and done with Drew Pearson 76, an American journalist on 24 August although the text of Khrushchev’s interview with Pearson was made public through Western as well as the Soviet mass media simultaneously only on 28 August.

75. Slusser, n.l, p.147.

76. Here it is worth mentioning that Khrushchev did not pick up Drew Pearson randomly. In fact, Pearson had written an article on Berlin crisis a few days back in which he had advocated that the Berlin was "not worth starting a world war over" Radio Moscow, 15 August 1961, quoted in Slusser, n.1, p.146. This was exactly how Khrushchev used to put forth his argument on Berlin crisis.
Interestingly, when read between the lines, the contents of the interview hardly contained anything new. All that Khrushchev wanted was to impress upon President Kennedy that the erection of the Berlin Wall was not an issue worth going for a war of any magnitude and there was still ample scope for negotiation:

"We are therefore ready at any moment to meet with leaders of the Western powers on this matter if they have a sincere desire to achieve a realistic settlement of the German problem on a mutually acceptable basis. To this I should like to add that they no less than we - and perhaps even more so - should be interested in having this problem peacefully solved. And if leaders of the Western powers, notably President Kennedy, want such a settlement, we declared long ago that we are always ready to come to a round table for peaceful negotiations." 77

Coincidentally, it was around this time that the Western alliance partners were facing a lot of internal pulls and pressures. Apart from the US, none of them seemed willing to take any positive initiative on Berlin issue. The British Prime Minister, Macmillan, bluntly put the Berlin crisis in perspective by saying that it was "very worrying but nothing more. Nobody (was) going to fight about it". 78 France was opposed to any negotiation with the USSR on the Berlin crisis as usual. It was only at President Kennedy's direct appeal to de Gaulle that "reduced the French reluctance over the West's initiative in suggesting the talks." 79 The West Germans, too, were virtually cajoled to announce: "the Western powers would soon propose negotiations to the Soviet Union on

77. Documents on Germany, n.11, pp.762-763.
78. Quoted in Slusser, n.1, p.150.
79. Ibid.
Thus, by August end, the Western powers somehow succeeded in arriving at a consensus among themselves to go for talks with the Soviets on Berlin question, though "the exact timing, place and circumstances of the talks remained to be worked out". 81

14. THE SOVIET ABOUT TURN

It was at this juncture that the Soviet government on 29 August "announced its decision to defer temporarily the release of Servicemen to the reserves". 82 The very next day, there came another announcement from the Soviet side that it was resuming the nuclear weapon tests. 83 The most interesting aspect of the Soviet government's announcement of prolonging military service was its portrayal of existing international situation "as one in which the Soviet Union and its allies were being threatened by a belligerent Western alliance". 84 Also, conveniently ignoring the Western allies' willingness at this point of time to sit across the table and negotiate, the statement further declared: "The

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83. In fact, the Soviet announcement for the resumption of nuclear tests was a major setback to the Geneva Test Ban talks which resumed on 28 August 1961 after a brief recess.
84. Slusser, n.1, p.158. Quite interestingly while depicting international situation as critical and tense the Soviet leadership conveniently ignored their own contributions in it through their decision of erecting the Berlin Wall and the August 23 Note etc.
interests of the security of the Soviet Union demand that the best trained Soviet soldiers continue their service in the armed forces of the Soviet Union until a peace treaty with Germany is concluded.\textsuperscript{85}

Therefore, any move towards the solution of the German Question must precede the peace treaty with Germany and must take into consideration the fact that the Soviet stand on this point was fixed and, thus, there existed no further scope for negotiation. Furthermore, the Soviet leadership this time went a step ahead of fixing a time limit for the conclusion of the peace treaty, failing which the Soviet Union would conclude it jointly with other peace-loving states by the end of this year.\textsuperscript{86}

The Soviet Union, thus, tried to convey to the Western powers that, if at all, they rejected the Soviet peace proposals for the solution of the German Question, it would sign a peace treaty with the GDR alone.\textsuperscript{87}

\textsuperscript{85} Documents on Disarmament, n.36, p.309, quoting Radio Moscow, 29 August 1961.

It is worth mentioning that the Soviet announcement of 29 August 1961 also made it very clear that the Soviet Union would discuss the terms of a German peace treaty with the Western allies only when the latter recognized the existence of two German states - the FRG and the GDR. "With the conclusion of a peace treaty", the Soviet government assured, "West Berlin (would) obtain the status of a demilitarized free city with guarantees of non-intervention in its internal affairs". Ibid., p.312.

\textsuperscript{86} Documents on Disarmament, n.36, p.315, emphasis supplied.

\textsuperscript{87} Ibid.
15. THE BAREFACED DECEPTION

Quite interestingly, Khrushchev did try to explain to the World at large that the basic purpose behind holding back retiring army personnel and resumption of nuclear tests was "to shock the Western powers into negotiations over Germany and disarmament." 88 But when seen the German Question in a perspective at least since mid-1950's it can safely be concluded that the undeclared Soviet intention behind taking aforesaid measures one after another in quick succession, was precisely to disrupt "the growing movement on both sides toward negotiation" 89 on Berlin and the broader German Question.

Admittedly, the Western powers were so much preoccupied with "the monolithic character of Soviet foreign policy formulation, however, that this bold exercise in barefaced deception achieved complete success", 90 so much so that even Kennedy himself accepted Khrushchev's rationale of such Soviet moves. It was only in the retrospective analysis of the whole course of events concerning the German Question, the Berlin crisis of 1961 in particular, that the Soviet government's announcement of deferring, for the time being, the release of the army servicemen to the reserves and of resuming nuclear tests, the Western alliance partners could understand the Soviet policy of double cross in proper perspective. Only then, it was realized by the Western powers that Khrushchev's stage-managed protest against the West was not at all intended to

89. Slusser, n.1, p.167.
cajoling them to come to the negotiating table. Rather, such Soviet moves "marked the tacit abandonment of any Soviet desire for negotiation"91 on the German Question as a whole.

The Soviet government was, therefore, successful in the most effective way, not only in forestalling the proposed peace treaty by provoking the Western powers through its dramatic announcement of the resumption of nuclear tests and prolongation of services of the army personnel, but also driving home a point that it was the Western powers who actually did not want any meaningful dialogue towards the solution of the German Question.

16. THE SOVIET PEACE OVERTURE

On 1 September 1961, the Soviet Union tested its first medium range nuclear device. On 5 September, Khrushchev in his interview to C.L. Sulzberger, the then Diplomatic Correspondent of the New York Times, told him to tell President Kennedy:

"I would not be loath to establishing some sort of contact with him to find a means, without damaging the prestige of the United States, to reach a (German) settlement - but on the basis of a peace treaty and a free Berlin. And through such informal contacts the President

91. Slusser, n.1, p.168. "The motive behind the choice of this moment to resume testing was taken by opinion generally all over the world as the desire further to increase the pressure on Western alliance". D.C.Watt, Survey of International Affairs, 1961 (London:Oxford Univ Press, 1965), p.256.
might say what is on his mind in ways of solving the problem". 92

Frol R. Kozlov, the then secretary of the CPSU Central Committee, supplemented Khrushchev's peace overture on 12 September 1961 in Pyongyang by stating: "Our proposals are not an ultimatum", 93 which meant for all practical purposes, lifting of the Soviet deadline set to sign a German peace treaty by the end of 1961, although his policy statement of such a magnitude was not substantiated through action immediately by the Soviet leadership. Nonetheless, Kozlov's announcement did signaled the beginning of the end of Soviet campaign on Berlin.

The Soviet leadership by now had gathered sufficient justifications for their decision to go for a drastic shift in Soviet policy towards the German Question as such. Moreover, by constructing the Berlin Wall they did succeed in securing the stability of the East German communist regime running well below the nose of the Western nations of capitalist social formation. The Soviets, furthermore, reconciled themselves to the fact that the West could not be pressurized beyond a point to accept the Soviet position on Berlin issue as also the larger issue of the German Question. Therefore, the Soviet leadership decided to consolidate its position in the GDR alone and also try to project it to


be a model communist regime in Europe particularly since President Kennedy's address to the UN General Assembly on 25 September 1961 in which he made it evidently clear that the US and the other Western powers did not consider the much publicized Soviet determination of signing a peace treaty with the GDR on its own - an act of provocation to the West of the magnitude that they should go for an all out war against the Soviet Union. At the same time, the Soviet leadership of late realized that the West was not at all willing to give away an orchard in return for an apple in solving German Question.

To conclude, "the crux of the matter", Khrushchev at last made clear, "was the contest of strength and will power between the Soviets and Western powers which was being waged over Berlin". 94 Logically, therefore, the German Question at large was bound to remain unsolved till the question of the Soviet-American strategic balance of power was to remain unresolved. The recent developments on international arena do attest to this fact. The collapse of Soviet Union paved the way for the ultimate reunification of Germany, thus settling the major issues involved in the German Question.

94. Slusser,n.1,p.309