



Berlin 1961: Kennedy, Khrushchev, and the Most Dangerous Place on Earth

By Frederick Kempe

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In June 1961, Nikita Khrushchev called Berlin "the most dangerous place on earth." He knew what he was talking about.

Much has been written about the Cuban Missile Crisis a year later, but the Berlin Crisis of 1961 was more decisive in shaping the Cold War-and more perilous. It was in that hot summer that the Berlin Wall was constructed, which would divide the world for another twenty-eight years. Then two months later, and for the first time in history, American and Soviet fighting men and tanks stood arrayed against each other, only yards apart. One mistake, one nervous soldier, one overzealous commander-and the tripwire would be sprung for a war that could go nuclear in a heartbeat.

On one side was a young, untested U.S. president still reeling from the Bay of Pigs disaster and a humiliating summit meeting that left him grasping for ways to respond. It would add up to be one of the worst first-year foreign policy performances of any modern president. On the other side, a Soviet premier hemmed in by the Chinese, East Germans, and hardliners in his own government. With an all-important Party Congress approaching, he knew Berlin meant the difference not only for the Kremlin's hold on its empire-but for his own hold on the Kremlin.

Neither man really understood the other, both tried cynically to manipulate events. And so, week by week, they crept closer to the brink.

Based on a wealth of new documents and interviews, filled with fresh-sometimes startling-insights, written with immediacy and drama, *Berlin 1961* is an extraordinary look at key events of the twentieth century, with powerful applications to these early years of the twenty-first.

Includes photographs

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Author Q&A with Frederick Kempe



Q: What led you to write this book?

A: The Cold War is still the least understood and worst reported of our three world wars. Berlin was its epicenter. The year 1961 was the most decisive. I wanted to tell the story of that year. And I wanted to tell it through its protagonists, as rich a cast of characters as history could provide. I also wanted to satisfy my own questions about whether the Berlin Wall could have been avoided—and whether the Cold War could have been ended much earlier. Might we have been able to help liberate a whole generation of Eastern Europeans—tens of millions of people—three decades earlier?

Then, after President Obama's election, I was even more motivated to finish my research. The reason is that this is also a story of a brilliant but inexperienced president dealing with issues far beyond his skill set. Kennedy's first year in office proved to be one of the worst of any modern presidency. U.S. presidents shape world history—and in this case it is not a positive story.

Q: Much has been written about the Cold War in general and about this particular time and place. What's different about this book?

A: Two aspects are quite different from what has appeared before. First, I pull in all the strands about this historic year that haven't been in a single book: the Kennedy story, the Khrushchev story, the Ulbricht and Adenauer stories. I also draw upon recently released documents in Russia, Germany, and the U.S. that haven't yet been put into a single story. I weave these into a narrative that is both human and historic, as has been my instinct to do as a journalist. Second and more important, the book builds the best cases to date that Kennedy acquiesced to the border closure and the building of the Wall. The record shows that in many respects he wrote the script that Khrushchev followed—as long as Khrushchev restricted his actions to

Soviet-controlled East Berlin and East Germany, Kennedy would accept his actions. Kennedy falsely believed that if East Germany could end its refugee stampede, Khrushchev might become a more willing negotiator on a set of other issues. It was a tragic misreading of the man and of the situation. Berlin paid for it—as did tens of millions of people.

Q: Among the main points you highlight in this book are the self-reinforcing misinterpretations, miscommunications, and misunderstandings between the U.S. and the USSR. What examples stand out to you as the most important?

A: They began years before Kennedy took office. The U.S. never fully recognized or acted upon how dramatic was the break between Khrushchev and Stalinism at the 20th Party Congress in 1956. Khrushchev's call for peaceful coexistence with the capitalist West was never fully explored. Nor did we ever answer or reward his support for Finnish and Austrian neutrality and his reductions in military personnel and spending. During Kennedy's presidency, the misreading began when Khrushchev released captured U.S. airmen and Kennedy failed to recognize the potential importance of the gesture. It continued when he misinterpreted a relatively unimportant hard-line propaganda speech by Khrushchev as a declaration of an even more aggressive Soviet challenge aimed at him. From Khrushchev's side, he often listened more to his own insecurities than what was warranted by the situation. He was enormously vulnerable to perceived slights—he would respond excessively to moments like the U-2 incident and Kennedy's State of the Union speech and the U.S. Minuteman missile test. However, there was one moment when Khrushchev listened closely to Kennedy's communication—and that regarded what the president would be willing to accept in Berlin. Then Khrushchev acted very much according to the clear messages he received.

Q: Do you think we could have ended the Cold War earlier if Kennedy had managed his relationship with Khrushchev differently?

A: As General Brent Scowcroft says in the foreword to the book, history doesn't reveal its alternatives. My own view is that the Soviet empire would have begun to unravel earlier had Kennedy held the line—but we will never know. It is unclear how the Soviets would have responded to that without a Gorbachev and a Yeltsin in charge. Would they have backed down, as they did during the Berlin Airlift of 1948, or would they have defended what they controlled, as they did in Budapest in 1956? The key difference between those two events was a demonstration of resolve by the U.S. with its nuclear superiority. I am certain of one thing: East Germany would have collapsed if the communists hadn't put up the Wall to stop the refugee flow—and that would have had severe consequences for the rest of the Soviet bloc. After all, it is the refugee flood that prompted its collapse twenty-eight years later. Whether or not the Cold War would have ended earlier, Kennedy certainly saved Khrushchev from a lot of trouble then by acquiescing to the building of the Wall.

Q: *Berlin 1961* is described as being based on a “wealth of new documents and interviews.” Please tell us about the research you did. What sort of new documents did you uncover, and what new interviews did you conduct?

A: Some of these were new documents I was able to find through additional research in Berlin, Moscow, and the United States. Some were new interviews with witnesses of the time—and the unearthing of interviews and oral histories that had previously received little notice. However, the real wealth of new material came from documents that had been released in all three countries that hadn't been brought together in a book that explained their meaning and their connections. Almost all of the most significant players from 1961 are no longer living; however their memoirs, oral histories, and documents recounting some of their most crucial meetings have either gone unnoticed or have attracted too little notice. Sadly, much of what we still need to know remains classified. But this book does make clear what we should be watching for most intensively when new documents are released, particularly those of President Kennedy's brother Robert.

Q: What surprised you most as you worked on the book, and what do you think will most surprise readers?

A: What most surprised me is the body of evidence that Kennedy not only was relieved by the Berlin border closure, but in many respects wrote the script for it. Reading the documents, I was also struck by how refreshingly self-aware Kennedy was about the failure of his first year as president and the danger that Khrushchev would consider him weak. On the Soviet side, what interested me most was the power of a weak client and his failing state, Walter Ulbricht and East Germany, to influence the actions of a great power. The greatest mystery to me remains the Georgi Bolshakov–Bobby Kennedy relationship, which I’m now confident played a larger role than can be documented.

Q: What do you want readers to get out of this book?

A: I want Americans to understand how the decisions of their presidents—then and now—shape world history in ways we don’t always understand at the time of a specific event. I want readers to know that Kennedy could have prevented the Berlin Wall, if he had wished, and that in acquiescing to the border closure he not only created a more dangerous situation—but also contributed to mortgaging the future for tens of millions of Central and Eastern Europeans.

The relatively small decisions that U.S. presidents make have huge, often global, consequences. Though most U.S. analysts and even historians have forgotten the events around Berlin in 1961, I want to start a debate about whether the U.S. actually could have ended the Cold War earlier. I also want to remind Americans of the cost to the world of perceived American weakness. Luckily, we escaped a nuclear conflict—both over Berlin and over Cuba—but the greatest danger came not because we overreached but because our adversary had concluded that we wouldn’t act to defend our interests.

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