KENNEDY’S EFFECT ON THE BERLIN CRISIS OF 1961

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HIST 110-05

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October 13, 2017

The Cold War created so much tension throughout the entire world, even countries that were part of the allied powers during the war felt the tension for 44 years. It was a destructive time period for countries geographically, in addition to the men and women who had to live through the struggles that their homelands were facing. There were many people, especially political authorities, who worked tirelessly to assist in repairing the damages made to the Soviet Union and European governmental relations. One of the most commonly known individuals who contributed positively to the Cold War through his efforts was President John F. Kennedy. Although President Kennedy’s term came to an untimely end, his administration significantly impacted the Cold War and, more specifically, the Berlin Crisis of 1961 by the expansion of the United States and its allies’ military powers, the increase of clandestine services among the KGB (Soviet Union), CIA (United States), and MI5 (United Kingdom), and the continuation of experimenting with atomic weapons.

During the Cold War, countries saw an array of different leadership, with Germany having the largest exposure. The separation of Germany and its capital, Berlin, after World War II caused troubles that stemmed from the Communist East to the Capitalist Democratic West. Kennedy came into office aware of the issues that he would have to deal with and was completely for the idea of negotiations. Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev held a summit in June of 1961 with United States’ President John F. Kennedy to address the lack of trust between the two superpowers.[[1]](#footnote-0) This conference only led to a growth of hostility among Americans and the U.S.S.R. due to Khrushchev announcing the possibility of the Soviet Union isolating East Berlin completely from the West. Immediately, Kennedy took precautions after the summit by instructing American armed forces to protect West Berlin from the Eastern territorial zone and their Communistic ideals, which caught Khrushchev off guard and caused him to place more stress on the progression of the Berlin Crisis. Kennedy met with British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan to discuss the nuclear test ban and they agreed that they needed “a nuclear test ban accompanied by effective inspection and control measures, agreeing that it is of crucial importance for world peace. They also expressed their conviction that renewed efforts should be made in the direction of general disarmament.”[[2]](#footnote-1) In multiple speeches, Khrushchev brought up the idea of economic competition rather than nuclear warfare, which President Kennedy realized would be a peaceful show of disagreement between countries rather than the danger of atomic weapons. Therefore, Kennedy advised the United States that they should not be alarmed, because he said, “We invite the U.S.S.R. to engage in this competition which is peaceful and which could only result in a better living standard for both of our people.”[[3]](#footnote-2)

Unfortunately, the hope for world peace, or at least peace between the two superpowers, did not last long for President Kennedy. The peace treaty that Kennedy and Khrushchev talked about during their meeting was the Soviet Union’s way of cutting ties between East and West Berlin. Kennedy was warned to increase his military forces in Europe, which is what he did. He expanded his powers militarily in hopes of provoking Khrushchev towards a compromise, without enough pressure to cause lack of restraint on the crisis. It was in Kennedy’s speech of strengthening his military powers on July 25th, 1961 that led to the protection of West Berlin and Bonn, which was the capital of West Germany at the time. During Kennedy’s Radio and Television Report to the American People on the Berlin Crisis speech, he announced that:

While it is unwise at this time either to call up or send abroad excessive numbers of these troops before they are needed, let me make it clear that I intend to take, as time goes on, whatever steps are necessary to make certain that such forces can be deployed at the appropriate time without lessening our ability to meet our commitments elsewhere. Thus, in the days and months ahead, I shall not hesitate to ask the Congress for additional measures, or exercise any of the executive powers that I possess to meet this threat to peace. Everything essential to the security of freedom must be done; and if that should require more men, or more taxes, or more controls, or other new powers, I shall not hesitate to ask them. The measures proposed today will be constantly studied, and altered as necessary. But while we will not let panic shape our policy, neither will we permit timidity to direct our program.[[4]](#footnote-3)

On August 13, 1961, the Berlin Wall was constructed directly between East and West Berlin to prevent a large decrease in the population of people in West Berlin. Over time, barbed wire was also added around the remaining borders of West Berlin, increasing the agitation within the two countries.

As tensions grew between America and the Soviet Union, the talk of testing atomic weapons intensified. Though there was never an occasion where nuclear weaponry was necessary, it was often a subject matter that was brought up by either country’s leader as a scare tactic. This strategy was used predominantly by President Kennedy, yet the United States and its allies insisted on a nuclear test ban for the Soviet Union in August of 1961. To their disappointment, the ban on the testing of nuclear weapons did not last long. On August 30, 1961, Moscow announced that due to how the United States reacted to the construction of the Berlin Wall, they would continue experimenting with atomic weapons.[[5]](#footnote-4) These actions were a direct response to Kennedy’s actions, which shows that he profoundly affected the use of nuclear weapons during this time period.

Towards the later half of the Cold War, Berlin became a major strategic spy base for America and the European countries involved in the war. Espionage growth led to major changes throughout the war, as well as the world in general terms. From that point on, America was aware of all of the Soviet Union’s advancements and the possibility of an all-out nuclear war. The United States Air Force had aircraft that they flew in order to spy on the U.S.S.R. during the Cold War, known as the Lockheed-Martin U-2 spy plane. The Central Intelligence Agency, Komitet Gosudarstvennoi Bezopanosti, known better as the KGB, and the Military Intelligence, Section 5, or MI5, were all intelligence agencies built in order to expand protection and security among West Germany against potential threats from the rival country. Due to the evolution in clandestine services proceeding construction of the Berlin Wall, intelligence operations completely impacted the future for modern-day intelligence in a positive way.

In conclusion, President John F. Kennedy did not only set high standards for presidents that would succeed him, but also inspired leaders from countries all across the world. He rarely, if ever, showed signs of weakness whenever he was faced with affairs dealing with the Soviet Union. Throughout the Cold War, and primarily the Berlin Crisis, Kennedy prepared the United States and his allied powers for the probable attack on West Berlin and the Western Bloc. His greatest accomplishments during his short time as president included his impact on the increase of military forces, espionage, and the expansion of knowledge on nuclear weapons. President John Fitzgerald Kennedy was a man of his words and was never afraid to be persistent about what he deemed to be correct. He stood for courage, dignity, and power, and strongly believed in those ideas, whether or not they came together with a loss or a gain. As Kennedy once said in his Address to New York City Before the General Assembly of the United Nations, “Together we shall save our planet, or together we shall perish in its flames.” [[6]](#footnote-5)

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1. Robert M. Slusser, *The Berlin Crisis of 1961* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 23 [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. U.S., Office of the Federal Register, *John F. Kennedy. Containing the Public Messages, Speeches, and Statements of the President, January 20 to December 31, 1961* (Washington, D.C.: G.P.O., 1962), 471 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Ibid., 478 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. John F. Kennedy, “Radio and Television Report to the American People on the Berlin Crisis” (speech, Washington, D.C., July 25, 1961), John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Jack M. Schick, *The Berlin Crisis: 1958-1962* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), 168 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. Kennedy, *John F. Kennedy. Containing the Public Messages, Speeches, and Statements of the President, January 20 to December 31, 1961*, 626 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)