

John Gearson, Kori Schake, eds. *The Berlin Wall Crisis: Perspectives on Cold War Alliances.* Cold War History Series. London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002. xxi + 209 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-333-92960-5.



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Alliances in Brinksmanship

When Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev demanded in November 1958 that all Western allied military forces vacate Berlin, President Dwight Eisenhower complained to his Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles: “Here is another instance in which our political posture requires us to assume military positions that are wholly illogical” (p. 130).[1] Eisenhower, like his counterparts President Charles de Gaulle of France and Chancellor Konrad Adenauer of the Federal Republic of Germany, believed that Khrushchev was bluffing, and that the Soviet leader had no intention of provoking a war over western access rights to Berlin. But in order to defend the western military presence in Berlin, the U.S. and its NATO allies had to be prepared to call Khrushchev’s bluff. In the words of General Lucius Clay, the hero of the Berlin Airlift of 1948-49: “The Russians will not go to war over Berlin but unless it is made clear that we would, there is no base from which we can negotiate” (quoted, p. 132).

In the opening chapter of this superb collection of essays, Lawrence Freedman notes that the Berlin Wall crisis of 1958-62 crystallized the harsh dilemmas of the Cold War: “Berlin was the pivot on which the Cold War turned

during the critical period of the late 1950s / early 1960s. If the Cold War was ever going to turn hot Germany always seemed the most probable cause, and Berlin the likely trigger.... Even if a crisis had nothing to do with Berlin, that was where it was likely to end up because that was where the West was at its most vulnerable, where the famous choices between suicide or surrender, holocaust or humiliation could well be confronted” (pp. 2, 1).

The volume is an outgrowth of the Nuclear History Program (NHP), an international research project initiated in the late 1980s to trace the history of the nuclear weapons programs and policies of the United States, Soviet Union and their allies. Because many of the contributors to this book worked together on the NHP as junior scholars, the study possesses greater focus and thematic coherence than most edited collections. The editors note in their introduction that the book presents a “mosaic of the national perspectives” in order to “highlight the complex intra-alliance politics of what was seen as the likeliest flash-point of conflict in the Cold War” (p. x). Two brief opening chapters, by Lawrence Freedman and John Gearson, situate the Berlin Crisis of 1958-

62 in its historical and strategic context. The remaining seven essays relate the story of this crisis from the perspective of the principal participants: the United States (Kori Schake), Britain (John Gearson), France (Cyril Buffet), the Soviet Union and the German Democratic Republic (Hope Harrison), the Federal Republic of Germany (Jill Kastner), Italy (Leopoldo Nuti and Bruna Bagnato) and NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe (Gregory W. Pedlow).

This approach yields significant new insights into the decision-making processes of the parties to the Berlin Crisis. Above all, the book "demonstrates how strongly determinant were concerns about relationships with allies in the choices made by all the major governments" (p. x). As the editors observe in their introduction, "States on the periphery of the crisis, like Italy ... feared being dragged into a conflict by their alliance commitments when they had little influence over the policy choices of the central actors. But even the governments most involved in shaping Berlin policies, such as Britain, considered themselves tightly constrained by the others' conflicting preferences and unable to establish a course of action independently, to such an extent that they resigned themselves to participation in World War III rather than pull away from an agreed allied policy, always hoping that such a decision would not be presented to them" (pp. x-xi).

Hope Harrison's chapter on the stormy relationship between Khrushchev and East German leader Walter Ulbricht offers a particularly vivid account of intra-alliance struggles. The chapter presents a synopsis of the argument of Harrison's excellent book *Driving the Soviets Up the Wall: Soviet-East German Relations, 1953-1961* (2003). Far from being a pawn in the global struggle between the United States and the USSR, she argues, the East German leadership played a leading role in the decision to build the Berlin Wall. Khrushchev, fearing a military confrontation with the West, long resisted Ulbricht's pleas to close the border between East and West Berlin. Instead, he repeatedly urged GDR leaders to implement domestic political and social reforms that would stanch the flow of its most skilled and educated citizens to West Germany. But Ulbricht's stubborn and single-minded campaign, which included overtures to China in the aftermath of the breach between Khrushchev and Mao, ultimately persuaded Khrushchev that the only viable way to save East Germany as a showcase of communism was to permit the closing of the border. Even after the construction of the Wall in August 1961, Ulbricht pulled Khrushchev into unwanted confrontations

with the West, as in the October 1961 standoff between Soviet and American tanks at Checkpoint Charlie, which was defused only through direct backchannel communications between Kennedy and Khrushchev.

The other case studies in the book document deep tensions and distrust within the NATO alliance as well. Yet the leaders of all of these states "understood from the outset that they could not dissociate themselves from the choices of their allies" (p. x). In both the East and West blocs, the need to placate restless allies inhibited efforts to achieve core national foreign policy objectives. According to the authors, "In each case, these failures are substantially attributable to the needs of compromise with allies, rather than preventing conflict with adversaries" (p. xi).

Another fascinating dimension of the study is its depiction of the contrasting ways in which leading statesmen and military strategists sought to come to terms with the threat of nuclear war. The articles suggest that, by the late 1950s, virtually no top-level political or military leader either in NATO or in the Soviet bloc seriously entertained the possibility of achieving a military victory in Europe through the use of nuclear weapons. Yet the deficit of NATO conventional forces vis-à-vis those of the Warsaw Pact, along with the vulnerable position of Berlin, meant that no western leader was willing to rule out the use of nuclear weapons in the event of a European war.

Western leaders sought to come to terms with this distressing strategic dilemma in a wide range of ways. On one side were those like Clay, de Gaulle and Adenauer, who "viewed Khrushchev and his colleagues as highly rational, tough bargainers" and believed that the "only way to deal with them was to be equally tough and to never give anything away without getting something in return" (p. 132). Because these leaders did not believe that Khrushchev would risk using nuclear weapons against the West, they favored a confrontational line against the Soviet Union. Adenauer's confidence, it should be noted, stemmed partly from his ignorance of the extent to which American strategic doctrine placed U.S. leaders in a "nuclear straight-jacket" that could easily escalate a conflict; and he received an "unpleasant shock" when he learned the full details of American military planning (p. 138). On the opposite extreme were figures like General Nathan B. Twinings, Eisenhower's Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who took a more fatalistic view. Twinings declared in 1958: "We must ignore the fear of general war. It is coming anyway. There-

fore we should force the issue on a point we think is right and stand on it" (p. 176).

The chapters on U.S. and NATO policy, by Kori Schake and Gregory W. Pedlow, take a dim view of the most aggressive Western military strategists, including Dean Acheson, who had served as Truman's Secretary of State. Acheson urged President Kennedy to expand NATO conventional forces in Europe in order to check Soviet ambitions. Acheson and his colleagues, including Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, argued that "reinforcement of NATO's non-nuclear capability would serve to broaden the choice of response" to Soviet aggression. As it turned out, however, this blunt-force approach alienated America's NATO allies, and the "expanded range of conventional force options did not translate into an expanded range of political choices" (p. 37)—as was glaringly revealed when Kennedy acquiesced to the building of the Berlin Wall rather than risk a nuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union. Conversely, John Gearson's chapter on British policy criticizes Prime Minister Harold Macmillan's more conciliatory approach to Khrushchev. Macmillan's "attempts to play the honest broker were doomed to failure," Gearson concludes, be-

cause "he lacked a clear conception of what he actually wanted to achieve" (p. 44).

Among the figures who come off best in the book is General Lauris Norstad, commander of both the NATO forces in Europe and the U.S. European Command. Norstad understood that military planning in the Berlin Crisis had to serve a broader diplomatic and political agenda; he "proved to be a master of moderation, responding with just enough force to meet the Soviet challenge without increasing the level of tension" (p. 194). In effect, Norstad recognized that the advent of the nuclear age had reversed Clausewitz' famous dictum: the invention of weapons capable of destroying human civilization meant that diplomacy now had to serve as the continuation of warfare by other means. Fortunately, the other principal decision-makers in the Berlin Wall Crisis also grasped this truth clearly enough that the Cold War remained cold throughout this perilous confrontation.

Note

[1]. The opinions expressed in this book review are those of the author and do not reflect the views of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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