

A Neutral's Description of the Building of the Wall (August 14, 1961)

Abstract

The following account from a Zurich newspaper describes the construction of a barrier through Berlin, the former German capital. The Swiss correspondent ponders the extent to which the Wall could effectively stem the flow of East German refugees and speculates about its potential to aggravate the international crisis surrounding Berlin's Four-Power status.

Source

The GDR is Being Cordoned Off from the West Soviets Violate the Four-Power Agreements on Berlin

Escape Routes out of the Soviet Zone are Blocked Off
Telephone call from our correspondent O. F.
Berlin, August 13

Last night, in a *despotic act*, the Pankow^[1] regime destroyed the *central element of the Four-Power status* of Berlin and the agreements concluded by the Four Powers after the lifting of the Berlin blockade, agreements that provide for freedom of movement within the four sectors of the city, free choice of workplace, and the free flow of traffic from the Soviet zone to Berlin. At the same time, the interior minister, the transportation minister, and the head of the administration in the Soviet sector, passed *unilateral resolutions*, whereby the citizens of the GDR and the residents of East Berlin are prevented from entering the Western sector of the city without authorization from the People's Police [*Volkspolizei*] precinct responsible for their residential district. The *60,000 cross-border commuters* in East Berlin and the peripheral areas of Berlin that belong to the Soviet zone are prohibited from continuing to engage in employment in West Berlin. For traffic across the sector border in Berlin, a regulation like the one on interzonal traffic between the Soviet zone and the Federal Republic will take effect.

Occupation of the Soviet Sector

At four o'clock in the morning, police and military forces of the SED state began occupying the Soviet sector. State security officers occupied streets and building entrances, and police set up barbed wire barriers along the sector border. Between 5 and 6 AM, members of the People's Police, the riot police, the so-called combat groups [of factory workers], and the paramilitary Society for Sport and Technology appeared *en masse* and occupied school buildings and factories. At 5:30 AM the first units of the East German People's Army [*Volksarmee*] could be seen with *light tanks*. Later, larger contingents of the People's Army arrived from the Soviet Zone with *heavy artillery*. Between 6 and 7 o'clock, helpers from the Red Cross of the GDR started blending in with the police. Between *Potsdamer Platz* and *Brandenburg Gate* the *street was torn up* and a stone wall was erected. The border guards put up a barrier on the park area behind the barricade. When East Berliners woke up that morning the military occupation of the Soviet sector had already been completed. The border between West Berlin and the Soviet zone has also been hermetically sealed off. Heavily armed forces are standing guard near the bridge leading from West Berlin to Potsdam, and patrol boats are traversing the Havel.

Ulbricht's regime proceeded according to the methods of a *cold occupation*. Everything was taken into account, and the regime took extensive measures to nip any rebellion in the bud. This step by Pankow is

a *peace-threatening violation of international agreements*. Through it, this area of more than a million residents—which does not belong to the Soviet Union under international law, but rather forms part of the special Berlin zone under joint administration by the Four Powers—has been incorporated into the Communist sphere of control. For the first time since the Prague Coup of 1948, the Soviet Union has *annexed a piece of European territory*. This despotic act is a direct challenge to the three Western powers, but the government in Bonn is also drawn into the matter, since the agreement of December 29 of last year [1960] on German interzonal trade is based on the precondition of *free traffic in Berlin*.

The Flow of Refugees Dries up

Last night 16 million people in the Soviet zone and in East Berlin disappeared entirely behind the Iron Curtain and were thrown into the night of non-freedom. For Polish and Czechoslovakian citizens, too, as well as for residents of other Eastern European satellite states of the Soviet Bloc, the gate to freedom has slammed shut. Because of its Four-Power status, up until now, West Berlin had been easier for residents of Eastern Europe to reach than the area west of the heavily guarded Soviet Bloc border. Through these GDR measures, the border that divides Europe into two halves has been completely closed. No more refugees arrived here this morning. There is no way to break out of Ulbricht's prison state. The flow of refugees over the weekend had swelled to an unprecedented level.

Simultaneous with the GDR decrees, the governments of the member states of the *Warsaw Pact organization* published a *declaration* in which Pankow's despotic acts were characterized as the execution of a "suggestion" by the Eastern Bloc states. Ulbricht thus enjoys the backing of the entire Eastern Bloc. It is clear that the decision to annex East Berlin to the Soviet zone was made in *Moscow* not Pankow and that Khrushchev is directly responsible for this aggressive act. The declaration by the Warsaw Pact countries explains that the cordoning-off measures did not affect travel between *West Berlin* and *West Germany* and that the "necessity of these measures will cease as soon as the peace settlement with Germany is realized." The "incorporation" of the Soviet sector of Berlin into the Soviet Occupation Zone is thus being brought into the context of Moscow's project of promoting a general peace treaty, and Pankow's step appears to be a partial anticipation of the "Free City" of West Berlin.

The role of West Berlin as a Western center radiating into the Eastern Bloc is seriously hindered by the aggressive policies of *fait accompli*. At the same time, the city is losing much of its function as a gateway to freedom. Every year an estimated nine million residents of the Soviet zone and the Soviet sector visited cinemas, theaters, and other cultural institutions [in West Berlin].

Bleak Mood in the GDR

Political circles in West Berlin fear that the *bleak mood in the Soviet Zone* could assume acute form. It must be reckoned with that people living in communities within the three-mile-wide no-man's land on the West German border could try to break through to West Germany, forcefully if need be. Evidently, the Soviets also anticipated dramatic developments. The *appointment of Marshal Koniev* as commander-in-chief of the Red Army troops stationed in East Germany is doubtless a precisely calculated demonstration to the public, which is supposed to take this to mean that any act of opposition to the Communist order would be senseless. Koniev's appointment and the concentration of the East German army on the borders won't be misinterpreted. Developments could threaten to get out of control if Khrushchev were to push the Berlin crisis too far by means of rash policies regarding the corridors between West Berlin and West Germany that are used by the Western powers.

High Alert in West Berlin

The *American troops* in West Berlin have been placed on alert for security reasons. The city's Senate convened in the morning for a special session. Afterwards, governing Mayor *Willy Brandt* met with the leading representatives of the Western powers. That evening a special session of the city parliament was

convened. In an initial statement, Willy Brandt, who will be holding a press conference this afternoon, called upon the Western powers to take vigorous measures against the aggression from the East, stressing above all the necessity for a decisive reaction to the measures against cross-border commuters. At the same time, Brandt asked the population of the city to remain calm.

NOTES

[1] Pankow is Berlin a neighborhood that occupies the northern portion of the territory that formerly constituted East Berlin. In the days of the GDR, Pankow was home to government leaders and other members of the political and social elite. Western commentators therefore often used the term “Pankow” as shorthand for the GDR regime—eds.

Source: Telephone call from a correspondent, “Abriegelung der DDR gegen den Westen,” *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, August 14, 1961, p. 1. © [Neue Zürcher Zeitung](#). All rights reserved.

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