

The Second Berlin Crisis: The Importance of Internal Dynamics in the Eastern Bloc

Introduction

The second Berlin crisis began in November 1958 and culminated with the edification of the Berlin Wall. It was one of the most delicate situations of the Cold War, one in which the Cold War could have become an actual war.

For several years, historiography has focused on the development of relations between the two blocs. Recently, however, it has been noted that, in order to fully understand the significance of the crisis, we have to focus on relations within the Eastern bloc. The aim of this work is, first of all, to effectuate an analysis of the main facts in the “traditional” way of conflict between the two antagonist blocs. Then, I would like to analyze the internal dynamics between the Eastern bloc (in particular the ambiguous relationship between the Eastern Germany leadership and Soviet Union leadership), in order to show how important they were during the crisis.

1. The development of the crisis: The dynamics between blocs

The city of Berlin had strategic importance during the Cold War years. According to Marie-Louise Recker: “Come *enclave* della Repubblica Federale ed *enclave* nella DDR, Berlino simboleggiava due contesti diversi, addirittura opposti: la città sulla Spree era da un lato simbolo della divisione della Germania, quale si era creata dopo la Seconda guerra mondiale, e dall’altro della speranza di riconquista l’unità tedesca [...]. Lo *status* speciale di Berlino, che derivava dai diritti delle potenze vincitrici alleate [...] ha fatto sì che la divisione della Germania non si sia mai realizzata per intero. Per via di questo *status* speciale e delle responsabilità delle potenze vincitrici nei riguardi della città, i problemi connessi a Berlino non furono mai soltanto una questione nazionale, ma rimasero sempre legati ai rapporti est-ovest. Questo determina l’importanza della

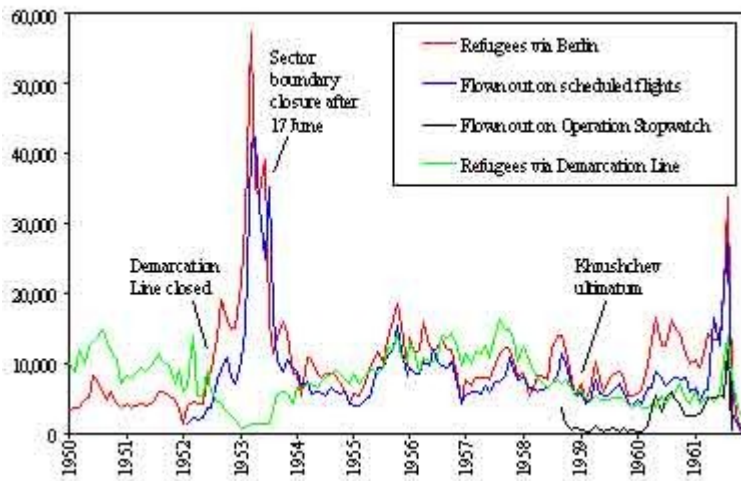
questione di Berlino”¹. Since the end of the Second World War, in particular since the Berlin Bloc (which began in July 1948 and ended in May 1949), the city, a western Island in the eastern world, represented, in a blunt Khrushchev expression, “western testicles”². Although it was isolated, Berlin was deemed instrumental in the Western view: “la città [...] divenne, in questo modo, sempre più un argomento di prova e un cavallo di battaglia della superiorità della democrazia occidentale e della libera economia di mercato; essa era considerata come ‘l’avamposto della libertà’ e la ‘vetrina dell’Occidente’, che simboleggiava, nella ‘competizione tra i sistemi’ dell’est e dell’ovest, il fascino della comunità di valori transatlantica. Il legame culturale, ideale ed emotivo con l’Occidente formò la base della sua identità e fu esibito nei confronti della parte orientale della città in modo ostentato”³. Two different and antithetical systems were forced to cohabit in the same city, and it was a unique event in the world. This was a source of tension. Therefore, Berlin could have erupted into a crisis, even if between 1949 and 1958 the situation was relatively calm⁴. The Federal Republic was established in the zones controlled by the Western Powers and the Democratic Republic was established in the zones controlled by USSR (the first one was recognized by Soviet Union in 1955, the second was not recognized by Western Powers). During this time, the feared build-up of the Federal Republic and its admission into NATO, uprisings in east Berlin in 1953, and the massive emigration of people from the eastern sector to the western one (which mainly concerned the youngest and most skilled) worried the GDR. East Germany feared that in a few years, the economic situation would collapse.

¹ “As an *enclave* of Federal Republic in the GDR, Berlin symbolized two different and opposite contests: on the one hand it was the symbol of the division of Germany after Second World War, on the other it represented the hope that Germany could have been reunited...Berlin’s special *status*, which originated from the rights of allied powers...caused the fact that the division of Germany never fully realized. Because of this special *status* and the responsibilities of the allied powers towards the city, the problem connected with Berlin was never just a national question, but they were always connected with East-West relations”. Marie-Louise Recker, “L’inasprirsi della questione tedesca: la seconda crisi di Berlino” 1958-1961, *Ricerche di Storia Politica*, anno XII, Bologna, il Mulino, 2009, p.327.

² William R. Keylor, “Un mondo di nazioni. L’ordine internazionale dopo il 1945”, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003, p.107.

³ “The city...became more and more evidence of the superiority of Occidental democracy and of free market economy; it was considered the outpost of freedom and the showcase of the West, which symbolized, in the competition between systems, the appeal of transatlantic values. The cultural and ideal link with the West shaped the base of its identity and was ostentatiously shown in the oriental part of the city”. Marie-Louise Recker, *op. cit.*, p.328.

⁴ E. Barker, “The Berlin Crisis 1958-1962”, *International Affairs*, vol.44, 1963, p.59. Probably “the relative calm is due to the fact that only in 1958 Khrushchev managed to fully win the battle for power began with Stalin’s death in 1953. Moreover the launch of artificial satellite Sputnik in 1957 seemed to hand the Soviets a technological advantage: “Mr. Krushchev might therefore have felt in a strong enough position to risk a major crisis in relations with the West”. Cfr. E. Barker, *op. cit.*, p. 60.



The long-serving Secretary of the SED (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*) and *deus ex machina* of the GDR Walter Ulbricht was very concerned by the massive emigration of people. In late 1957, he promoted a strong campaign against the *Republikflucht*. Therefore, the people who tried to escape from the GDR were threatened to be punished with up to three years in jail⁵. In general, Berlin's *status* was called into question: the SED argued that Berlin was on GDR territory and, therefore, Western Powers had no rights there. Even Khrushchev said that the situation "was not normal" and accused the Western Powers of exploiting West Berlin to organize subversive activities in the GDR⁶. Still, the Soviets were very concerned by the possible nuclear build-up of the Federal Republic. Besides, the Kremlin was scared even by the will of the *Bundeskanzler* Adenauer to reclaim a reunified Germany, the "old German lands annexed after the Second World War by the Soviet Union, Poland and Czechoslovakia"⁷. Moreover, the isolated and delicate position of West Berlin encouraged Khrushchev to force the events and test the resolve of the Western alliance.

Therefore, both the Soviet Union and German Democratic Republic were willing to change the *status quo* immediately before the crisis. Soviet leadership decided that it was time to act: on November 27, 1958, Khrushchev threatened to sign a separate peace treaty with GDR. Had the Western Powers not wanted to negotiate about the "normalization" of the situation, the capital would become Berlin and the GDR would assume every power⁸; negotiations should have taken place within six months as an *ultimatum*. Moreover, Khrushchev proposed transforming West Berlin into a demilitarized free city; the GDR should have guaranteed the communications and West Berlin authorities should have not allowed hostile activities on his territory⁹; this proposal was

⁵ Marie-Louise Recker, op. cit., p.330.

⁶ Ibidem, p.331.

⁷ Vladislav M. Zubok, Khrushchev and the Berlin Crisis (1958-1962), Working Paper no. 6, *Cold War International History Project*, Washington D.C., 1993, p.7

⁸ Ennio di Nolfo, *Dagli imperi militari agli Imperi tecnologici; La politica internazionale nel XX secolo*, Bari, Editori, Laterza, 2002, p.279. Indeed the circulation was still managed by USSR AND Khrushchev threatened to hand GDR the management of the situation. Cfr. Marie-Louise Recker, op. cit., p.331.

⁹ E. Barker, op. cit. p. 63.

not trusted by Western Powers. They feared that, after retiring Western troops, West Berlin would become totally dependent on, and successively incorporated in, East Germany¹⁰. In reply to the Soviet *ultimatum*, “the Eisenhower Administration coordinated a unified response from the British, French and US governments that denied the Soviets could unilaterally divest them of their rights in Berlin and reaffirmed their determination not to abandon the city”¹¹.

The Western Powers stood still and tried to gain time, demanding the maintenance of the *status quo*. It must be stressed that, according to some, Khrushchev had got the crisis underway without knowing where his behavior would lead him in the future and without clarifying which consequences a missed agreement with the Western Powers would have¹². In March 1959, his lack of a clear vision caused him to retire the *ultimatum* he handed the Western Powers few months before. The crisis would come back on the table of negotiations at the Conference of Foreign Ministries in Geneva in May-August 1959. Despite some attempts, perhaps a little tentative, to sort the question out, no agreement was reached in Geneva and the two opposing parties decided to try and sort the question out in Camp David on September 1959. President Eisenhower invited Khrushchev but even this meeting turned out to be quite inconclusive. Nevertheless, the Soviet leader promised that in the future he would avoid the *ultimatum*. This contributed, for a while, to a decrease in tensions¹³. Moreover, Khrushchev and Eisenhower enjoyed a good personal relationship. This was suddenly brought to an end by the U2 accident¹⁴. Actually, it is not clear if the U2 accident had genuinely contributed to the worsening of relations between US and USSR or if Khrushchev, since the negotiations in West Berlin were not going according to his wishes, sought a pretext to begin the crisis over again¹⁵. Khrushchev affirmed that he did not want to negotiate with Eisenhower any longer. The President had almost arrived at the end of his second term and at the beginning of 1961 he was replaced by John Fitzgerald Kennedy. The Berlin situation was discussed once again in Vienna on June 1961. In the Austrian capital, the Soviet leader handed Kennedy a memorandum, which more or less looked like the 1958 ultimatum. Kennedy told Khrushchev that he would accept the USSR’s right to sign a separate peace with the GDR¹⁶, but the United States did not want the Soviet Union to unilaterally modify West Berlin’s *status*. The Soviet leader was persuaded that Kennedy was an unexperienced adversary, and threatened war; “il presidente americano non esitò a sua volta a parlare di guerra [...]. Per la prima volta le due superpotenze avevano apertamente minacciato una guerra nucleare. Rischioso era soprattutto il fatto che i due rivali non avevano meglio definito il *casus belli*, che da entrambe le parti non era stato specificato

¹⁰ Marie-Louise Recker, op. cit., p.331.

¹¹ J. P. S. Gearson, K. Schake, The Berlin Wall Crisis, New York, Mac Millan, 2002, p. 28.

¹² E. Barker, op. cit. p. 61.

¹³ Marie-Louise Recker, op. cit., p.333.

¹⁴ Few days before a meeting in Paris, in May 1960, an American spy plane, a U2, was brought down by a Soviet missile. It flew on Soviet territory. Eisenhower could not deny the plane intentions and Khrushchev, to further increase US uneasiness, decided to publicly and strongly denounce the fact. Cfr. Ennio di Nolfo, p. 282.

¹⁵ E. Barker, op. cit. p. 63.

¹⁶ William R. Keylor, op. cit. p. 107.

cosa, nella questione di Berlino, fosse un principio irrinunciabile e cosa materia negoziabile [...]. Questo rese la crisi di Berlino del 1961 così straordinariamente pericolosa”¹⁷.

In the summer of 1961, Kennedy defined three non-negotiable principles (*essentials*) of American policy in Berlin: 1) presence and safety of troops in West Berlin; 2) safety and vitality of West Berlin; 3) physical access in West Berlin. These principles referred only to West Berlin so it seemed that, for the US, original rights in the whole of Berlin were no longer considered of vital interest; he was even available to negotiate with East Germany¹⁸. The Western Powers did not form a united front: British premier MacMillan would be “available” to “get closer” Soviet Union (he feared that military escalation could lead to a nuclear war); France’s de Gaulle was rather content with the American attitude, but did not want to modify the four powers in Berlin; in the Federal Republic, the limitation to the three *essentials* was interpreted as a clear alarm signal of a change in American attitude. In the West Germany point of view, the ally more trustworthy in the Berlin question was France¹⁹. While the two superpowers faced each other and the Soviet frustration grew stronger because of the impossibility to modify the *status quo*, the flow of East Germans who went to West Berlin became more massive. So, it was decided, on August 13, 1961 to isolate West Berlin with a barbed wire to prevent people from entering. Even in West Berlin and the Federal Republic, frustration and the sense that they had been betrayed by the Allies were widespread. This contrasted heavily with the first Berlin crisis, when the Western Powers promptly helped Western planes and the construction of the wall contributed to a decrease in international tension. Indeed, the flow of people strongly decreased even though it did not come to a complete stop. Moreover, the GDR government recognized the border between East and West as a state frontier between East and West Germany and so they abandoned the claim for the entire Berlin as part of the territory of East Germany²⁰. The construction of the wall seemed to avoid a further military escalation. The GDR *de facto* respected the three *essentials* and so military countermeasures were not taken into consideration²¹.

Obviously, the tension did not totally decrease and the drastic change of the *status quo* had some consequences. A few weeks after the division of Berlin, over an issue affecting the freedom of access for Western allies in West Berlin, Soviets and Americans troops directly faced each other. However, the conflict did not occur²². On July 25, 1963, after negotiating a moratorium on nuclear tests, the US and USSR reached a verbal agreement on the Berlin question, which, *de facto*, brought a final end to the crisis. The US would respect European borders as they were at end of Second World War and would favor the integration of two Germanys in their respective blocs. While the

¹⁷ “The American President did not hesitate to speak about war...For the first time the two superpowers overtly threatened a nuclear war. Overall, it was risky that the two superpowers did not specify what was the *casus belli*: they did not want specify what could be negotiated and what could not...that made 1961’s Berlin crisis so extraordinarily dangerous” M.L. Recker, op. cit., p.335.

¹⁸ M. L. Recker, op. cit., p. 336.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 336.

²⁰ E. Barker, op. cit. p. 69.

²¹ M. L. Recker, op. cit., p. 336.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 338.

USSR made it clear that in the future they would recognize the status of West Berlin, including the presence of Western troops and would not discuss the three essential principles²³.

Now, I would like to focus on what happened during the crisis within the Eastern bloc. In order to fully understand Khrushchev's behavior, it is essential to focus on his ambiguous relation with Ulbricht and on Chinese pressure²⁴. This will constitute the second part of this work.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 339.

²⁴ "East German influence on Soviet policy during the Berlin Crisis was much more important than previously believed. The evidence from the newly opened archives also shows that the Soviet leader, Nikita S. Khrushchev, was more interested in reaching a German settlement with the West and preoccupied with preventing East German leader Walter Ulbricht from sabotaging this process than has been recognized. In addition, the documents confirm the view of several scholars that Soviet fear of West German acquisition of nuclear weapons was an important influence on Soviet *Deutschlandpolitik* (policy on Germany) connected with the crisis. Finally, the role of the faltering East German economy looms much larger in the documents than previously known". Cfr. H. Harrison , "Ulbricht and the concrete rose: new archival evidence on the dynamics of soviet-east German relations and the Berlin crisis 1958-1961",), Working Paper no. 5, Cold War International History Project, 1993, p.7.

2 The ambiguous Ulbricht-Khrushchev relationship

First of all, it must be stressed that East Germany was very important for USSR in general and for Khrushchev in particular. He was convinced that had communism failed in East Germany, it would be bound to fail even in USSR. In 1953 he accused Beria and Malenkov of wanting to betray socialism in East Germany. Moreover, from a strategic point of view, East Germany was the most “western” of eastern countries and directly faced NATO. Ulbricht was aware of the importance of his country and cunningly used this leverage during the crisis²⁵.

The East German leader had long pushed for Soviet leadership to close the border around West Berlin. In February 1958, he said, “West Berlin continues to be a center of hostile activity against the GDR and other socialist countries, which is aggravated by the absence of closed sectoral borders...We must proceed from the fact that the Berlin question can be resolved independently from resolving the entire German problem, by the gradual economic and political conquest of West Berlin. Particular attention should be paid to strengthening political work in West Berlin and carrying out certain economic and cultural measures. Regarding various types of administrative measures, we should turn to these only in the extreme circumstance of avoiding an undesired aggravation of the situation in the city”²⁶. The soviet leader resisted for a while, in order not to increase the tension against the Western Powers. But the importance of Eastern Germany “lured” him into action. That motive should not be forgotten as it is as important as the other motives (the Soviet willingness to prevent West Germany from building up, the attempts to break the unity of the Western Powers, or Khrushchev’s determination to show his internal opposition and the Chinese that he was tough enough) when we analyze the causes which pushed Khrushchev to begin the crisis. Ulbricht “patiently” waited for two years (but he solicited Khrushchev to implement the threats he addressed to the Western Powers). Then, in the autumn of 1960, he unilaterally implemented measures to attempt to obtain control at the border and at the access points of Berlin²⁷. During the crisis, Khrushchev’s behavior was not always compatible with Ulbricht’s will and the tough posture of the German leader often was an obstacle for Khrushchev in his negotiations with the Western Powers²⁸. The SED’s Secretary was concerned by the fact that the Soviet Union had recognized West Germany in 1955, while the Western Powers refused to recognize East Germany. In September 1960 “the East Germans announced ... that Western diplomats accredited to embassies in Bonn had to obtain permission from the East German Foreign Ministry to enter East Berlin”²⁹. The Soviet Union thought that these provocations were useless or harmful. The main problem was that there were deep differences between Soviet and German views³⁰. Ulbricht was uninterested in *détente* with the Western Powers; his main preoccupation was annexation of West

²⁵ H. Harrison, op. cit., p. 9.

²⁶ Ibidem, p. 10.

²⁷ J. P. S. Gearson, K. Schake, op. cit., p. 99.

²⁸ Ibidem, p. 101.

²⁹ J. P. S. Gearson, K. Schake, op. cit., p. 105.

Berlin. Khrushchev, even if he did not accept the *status quo*, wanted the city to be neutral³¹. Besides, the ongoing flow of young and skilled people from East Berlin was a problem of vital importance for Ulbricht, whereas for Khrushchev, Berlin was overall a tactical weapon to use against the Western Powers. That is the reason why solutions to sort the Berlin crisis out were so different: the Soviet Union wanted to transform Berlin in a demilitarized free city with a treaty, while Ulbricht's main interest was not the signing of a peace treaty but to obtain as soon as possible the "control of the sectoral border and full control over all the GDR territory, including full control over the links between West Berlin and the FRG that go through the GDR"³². Indeed, SED's Secretary feared an embargo by the West (which East Germany could not afford) had East Germany and Soviet Union signed a separate peace treaty³³.

The GDR leader was in a similar position as Chinese leader Mao, who, *mutatis mutandis*, had Taiwan as his delicate situation. Both thought that Khrushchev was not tough enough and pushed him to adopt a tougher posture in negotiations vis-à-vis the Western Powers. He should not be disposed to make compromises³⁴. When the so-called Chinese-Soviet schism did occur³⁵, Ulbricht did not hesitate to use the "Chinese card" to put pressure on Khrushchev and to exploit the differences between Moscow and Peking in order to get advantages as far as Berlin was concerned. An East Germany delegation went to Peking in January 1961: the Germans obtained full support from the Chinese for their hard stance and their claim on Berlin. The Soviets did not know about the trip and only found out about it later³⁶. Therefore, Khrushchev was in a very uncomfortable situation: on the one hand, he had to resist pressure from the Communist bloc (if at this stage there was one) and, on the other hand, he had to bargain with the Western Powers. The Soviet leader managed to contain Ulbricht's requests to modify the *status quo* only for a few months. After criticizing his soft Soviet posture with Mao, Ulbricht in the successive months of 1961 decided to use the Chinese card in another way. In a Warsaw Pact meeting, he strongly sided with the USSR

³⁰ "These differences can be boiled down to the following: Khrushchev always saw and used West Berlin more as a lever to compel the West to recognize really Khrushchev's way of using West Berlin as a lever, since the key implication of his separate treaty threat was that the GDR would then have control over the access routes to West Berlin the post-war status quo and the existence of East Germany, and Ulbricht always saw West Berlin more as a prize, although he was certainly willing to exploit it as a lever until he got it as a prize". Cfr. H. Harrison, op. cit., p.11.

³¹ "[...]Khrushchev wanted to keep it a neutral territory. He needed it both as a geostrategic Achilles's heel of the Western security system and a Western Hong Kong, a trade link between the communist East and capitalist West Germany. He was prepared to negotiate with Americans, British and French over their presence in and access to West Berlin. But the status quo was unacceptable because it was tantamount to the disruptive presence of rich West Germany at the heart of the weak unstable GDR". Cfr. V. Zubok, op. cit., p. 16.

³² J. P. S. Gearson, K. Schake, op. cit., p. 110.

³³ V. Zubok, op. cit., p. 19.

³⁴ P. S. Gearson, K. Schake, op. cit., p. 102.

³⁵ The relations between the two countries began to deteriorate during the XX congress of PCUS, when Mao was not content with Khrushchev heavy critics of Stalin behavior. In general Mao thought that the Soviet leader was too soft with Western Powers. When Tito was rehabilitated and during the management of the Berlin crisis the relations between the two countries collapsed. At the end of the sixties there was even a short war because of unresolved border problems. Cfr. Ennio di Nolfo, op. cit., p.309.

³⁶ J. P. S. Gearson, K. Schake, op. cit., p. 109.

against the Chinese and their Albanian allies to show Khrushchev that he could trust him³⁷. Moreover, in case of a Western embargo, the USSR's Eastern Europe satellites were not willing to help, from an economic point of view, the GDR. Likely, this was "the final straw leading Khrushchev to see that he had to agree to close the border around West Berlin to help the GDR"³⁸. The economic situation in East Germany, strained by the massive emigration, was too tough. Besides, Khrushchev did care about the standard of living of the GDR, as the country was naturally subjected to a direct confrontation with the Federal Republic.

The GDR's leaders were elated when they contributed to the substantial inaction of the Western Powers following the construction of *Berlinermauer*³⁹. That much enthusiasm did not delude Khrushchev. In October he clearly stated that the USSR would not have supported or even tolerated any unilateral attempt of East Germany against the any longer western part of Berlin to force the new *status quo*⁴⁰. The tension continued until 1962 when there was a diplomatic accident which caused some difficulties in relations between the USSR and GDR. In May, Ulbricht enigmatically told Soviet ambassador Pervukhin, that should tension rise around the wall, he would not feel responsible for further complications. The Soviet *politburo* ordered Pervukhin to warn Ulbricht that any action concerning West Berlin should have been previously decided with Moscow. Ulbricht wrote a letter to Khrushchev telling him that it was a misunderstanding and blamed the Soviet ambassador Pervukhin for the misunderstanding⁴¹.

Final Considerations

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 101.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 112.

³⁹ V. M. Zubok, op. cit., p. 29.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 30.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 31.

The second Berlin crisis is one of the most complicated Cold War events to assess. Even if the two rival parts got very close to the outbreak of a war, no competitors actually wanted to be involved in a conflict. The Soviet leader Khrushchev, maybe underrating Ulbricht tenacity, was in the most uncomfortable position during the entire crisis, having to deal with opposing pressures from the Western Powers and East Germany. The GDR leader, acknowledging the importance of East Germany for Khrushchev, at times exaggerated the East Germany economic situation to advantage East Germany⁴².

In the words of Hope Harrison, the differences between Khrushchev and Ulbricht, which were never fully resolved, “made the Berlin Crisis a Soviet-East German as well as an East-West crisis, and Ulbricht behavior added to the intensity of the crisis. The Soviet and East German leaders differed over several issues: how and when to remedy the destabilizing influence on East Germany emanating from West Berlin; how much control East German should have over the access routes between East Germany and West Berlin; how to stop the East German refugee flow; the degree to which the Soviets and East Germans should risk a confrontation with the West over Berlin; whether the Soviet Union and other socialist countries should sign a separate peace treaty with East Germany in the event the Western Powers refused to sign a German peace treaty; the extent of relations the socialist countries should have with West Berlin; and the manner and the extent to which the Western powers should be pressed to recognize formally the existence of the East German regime⁴³”

Indeed, and this sounds paradoxical, the more East Germany moved to collapse, the more Ulbricht’s bargaining power *vis-à-vis* the Soviet Union increased. However, the construction of the Berlin Wall, a dramatic event for the German population, was accepted by the Western Powers but also by the Soviet Union⁴⁴, which feared that Ulbricht would try to annex West Berlin *manu militari*. Moreover, the Soviets thought that the Berlin Wall was a good solution to protect the GDR’s weak economy, without deeply involving the Soviet Union⁴⁵

Bibliography

⁴² H. Harrison, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

⁴³ H. Harrison, “Driving the Soviets up the Wall: Soviet-East German Relations, 1953-1961” *Princeton Studies in International History and Politics*, 2004, p. 141.

⁴⁴ H. Harrison, Ulbricht and the concrete rose: new archival evidence on the dynamics of soviet-east German relations and the Berlin crisis 1958-1961”, Working Paper no. 5, *Cold War International History Project*, Washington, D.C, 1993

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 62.

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