2 The Deadline Crisis

Khrushchev's attack on the West's presence in Berlin in the autumn of 1958 caught the Western alliance by surprise, despite an on-going series of disputes. Anglo-German relations were in a delicate state over the EEC-EFTA question, with the British government unsure how to support Adenauer against an external Soviet threat at a time when it was unhappy with him on trade matters. Khrushchev's initial threat to turn over the control functions in Berlin to the DDR caused confusion in Western capitals. The British, predisposed towards compromise, quickly settled on the possibility of recognising the East German regime as a price worth paying for a Berlin settlement, to the dismay of their main allies. The debate over how to respond to Khrushchev saw little agreement, either militarily or politically, among the three allied occupying powers and the FRG, but Britain was singled out as the weakest link and accused of defeatism. This resulted from an ill-conceived decision by the Foreign Office to present the problem as a stark choice between compromising on dealing with the East German regime, or preparing for war. Although this reflected concerns shared by a number of Western countries, Britain's policy of emphasising the extent to which the West was powerless to stop Khrushchev damaged Anglo-German relations and set the tone for the entire Berlin crisis.

KHRUSHCHEV'S ULTIMATUM

Signs of an impending crisis had been gathering during 1958, with a persistent campaign of low-level harassment of the Western presence in Berlin and escalating propaganda against West Germany. Civilian access to West Berlin was subjected to increased inspection and delays, and allied convoys were periodically stopped and papers demanded by Soviet officers. According to one Foreign Office official, 'In Berlin, we were really waiting for something to happen, we had been waiting a very long time.' In September, the USSR sent a note to the Western powers calling for a four-power commission to prepare a German peace treaty. East German officials spoke of the need to normalise the situation in Berlin and, by October, the East German leader, Walter Ulbricht, was arguing that 'All of Berlin lies in the
territory of the GDR’ and the West had no right to be in Berlin. On 10 November, Khrushchev involved himself by calling for the removal of foreign troops from West Berlin during a friendship meeting at Poland’s Moscow embassy:

The time has evidently come... for the powers which signed the Potsdam agreement to give up the remnants of the occupation regime in Berlin and thus make it possible to create a normal atmosphere in the capital of the German Democratic Republic. The Soviet Union for its part will hand over those functions in Berlin which are still in the hands of Soviet organs to the sovereign German Democratic Republic.

A few days before he had compared a meeting between de Gaulle and Adenauer with Hitler’s 1934 meeting with Mussolini. On 20 November, the Soviet ambassador to Bonn, Andrei Smirnov, informed Adenauer that the Soviet Union intended to ‘liquidate the occupation statutes concerning Berlin’, after which Macmillan received a personal message from ‘an obviously shaken’ chancellor appealing to him to make a personal representation to Khrushchev expressing his concern. Macmillan found it difficult not to accede to Adenauer’s request: ‘The British Government has every intention of upholding their rights in Berlin which are soundly based.’

Official confirmation of the USSR’s position arrived with a Soviet diplomatic note on 27 November to the three allied occupying powers and the FRG. It spelt out in greater detail and far more aggressively the Soviet position on Berlin, stating that the USSR regarded the ‘Agreement on the Administration of Berlin’ of 12 September 1944 as null and void, that the continued occupation was unlawful and that ‘Only madmen can go to the length of unleashing another world war over the preservation of privileges of occupiers in Berlin.’ As a concession, a demilitarised free city for West Berlin could be established, but the Western powers had only six months to bring the occupation status to an end, after which the USSR would carry out the planned measures through direct agreement with the DDR. The note threatened the whole basis of the four-power agreements on Germany, Western access to and from West Berlin and hinted at the possibility of war, although the Soviets appeared confused. In his speech Khrushchev had referred to violations of the Potsdam Agreement, but this was irrelevant since Western rights derived from the unconditional surrender of Germany and the Quadripartite Agreements of September 1944 and May 1945, not from Potsdam. The