The focus of this book is on the Western alliance and the various separate and joint Western responses to the Berlin crisis, but since it was the Soviets who launched the crisis, this book would not be complete if their side of the crisis was not also examined. Just as alliance politics were a crucial part of and a complicating factor in the Western response to the crisis, so they were an essential element of the Soviet side as well. Indeed, a thorough and accurate picture of the Soviet side of the crisis is not possible without understanding the difficult alliance politics they had to manage with the East Germans.  

While the American leaders had to take into account the different approaches and interests of the West Germans, British, and French in their handling of the Berlin crisis, the Soviet leaders had to take into account the preferences of the East Germans, as well as some of their other allies, in their handling of the crisis. As we shall see, a variety of direct and indirect forms of pressure from the East Germans had important effects on Soviet options and Soviet policy making during the Berlin crisis. In particular, the length and intensity of the Berlin crisis and the decision to build the Berlin Wall were in large part due to East German pressure. The extent to which the Western powers believed that the aggressive, unilateral moves undertaken by the East Germans during the Berlin crisis were actually instigated by the Soviets would have inclined them to be less accommodating toward the Soviets. Thus, East German policies may to a certain extent have interfered in the efforts of the superpowers or the Four Powers to reach an agreement.

On the grounds that it was ‘politically unacceptable and grossly simplistic’, the Soviets in fact resisted East German requests to close the border around West Berlin for at least eight years, on the grounds that such a move would alienate and embitter the Berliners, the Germans
and the Western powers. They finally acquiesced in the summer of 1961 to the claim of East German leader Walter Ulbricht that closing the border was the only sure way to stop the refugee exodus from East Germany to West Germany via West Berlin and to shore up the East German economy and state. The Soviets had urged the East German leaders to deal with their problems by other means, such as by instituting a more flexible form of socialism which would entice people to stay at home instead of fleeing West, since they knew building a wall would make them look bad and would be an admission of defeat. Ulbricht, however, did not want to loosen his grip on power and favoured a more hard-line resolution of the refugee problem exemplified in the building of the Wall. Direct and indirect actions by Ulbricht and his allies, therefore, aimed to ensure that the Soviets would ultimately see no other option than closing the border if they wanted to support a continued socialist German Democratic Republic (GDR).

Prior to the opening of archives in the former Soviet bloc, scholars had very few primary sources to draw on from the communist side and thus had to rely largely on Western sources supplemented by speculation. Thus, it was very difficult to get a full picture of the decision making process on the Soviet side and to determine their motivations and the factors influencing them in the Berlin crisis and in general. While scholars believed the East Germans played some role in the crisis, they ascribed most of the influence on Soviet policy to the Soviet desire to prevent West Germany from gaining access to nuclear weapons, Soviet efforts to undermine the Western alliance, and to domestic pressures on Khrushchev to appear tough to critics of his reformist anti-Stalinist policies. Archival evidence released over the past dozen years from the former Soviet Union, East Germany and other former communist countries reveals that Khrushchev’s concern about the GDR and pressure from the GDR were the most consistent influences on him during the crisis. Khrushchev’s goals regarding the stabilisation and strengthening of the GDR, combined with the actions of the East German leaders, were essential parts of the crisis, particularly in the final year leading up to the erection of the Berlin Wall.

While the Kremlin archives with their files of the top level of Soviet decision making still remain closed for the majority of scholars, the accessibility of the archives of the Foreign Ministry and the Central Committee of the former Soviet Union, as well as the archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Socialist Unity Party, and secret police (the Stasi) of the former GDR, combined with archives of other former Soviet bloc countries and memoirs by former communist officials