**The Berlin Wall crisis: the view from below**

**Patrick Major, University of Warwick**

The second Berlin crisis of 1958–61 has traditionally been viewed from the top down, as a showdown between the Whitehouse and the Kremlin. Such international relations accounts begin with the Khrushchev ultimatum of 1958, taking in the various summit talks at Geneva and Paris, and end with the impasse at Vienna between Kennedy and Khrushchev in 1961. ([1](http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/cold/articles/major.html#1)) This is perhaps typical of Cold War history more generally, which tends to focus on diplomatic and military history, and the decision-making elites. Admittedly, more recently, as part of the 'post-revisionist synthesis', historians unhappy with the bipolarity of such approaches have 'decentred' the Whitehouse-Kremlin axis to focus on their junior partners, for instance the British in the western case, ([2](http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/cold/articles/major.html#2)) or the East Germans for the East. ([3](http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/cold/articles/major.html#3)) Yet, even these diplomatic histories often treat the Berlin crisis as the proxy resolution of other issues, be it the removal of atomic weaponry from the Federal Republic, or the Soviet Union's attempts to prove to the Chinese that it was no paper tiger. ([4](http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/cold/articles/major.html#4)) Nor should it be forgotten that the overt bones of contention – issues which spilled so much ink in so many diplomatic notes, such as evacuation of West Berlin or a post-war peace treaty – were never actually resolved. We encounter many what if's and contingency plans, but little about what was happening on the ground. The 'elephant in the room' in such diplomatic and military histories, at least for any historian of the internal development of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), is the East German population's massive exodus westwards through the open border. This was the prime cause of the crisis, and it was the border's closure which effectively ended it.

I wish to make the case below that leaders on both sides were swept along by this elemental force and that the Berlin crisis was as much a 'people's crisis' as it was a superpower affair. Behind the famous international upset triggered in November 1958, when Khrushchev ordered the western powers to vacate the western sectors of Berlin, lurked a number of other domestic crises. The first regards the open border to West Berlin and the problem of what the East German authorities called 'flight from the Republic' (Republikflucht). By the building of the Berlin Wall in August 1961 approximately one in six East Germans had fled the GDR. Ever since 1945 and the occupation of Germany there had been problems over the interzonal borders, particularly those between the American and British zones in the West and the Soviet Zone in the East. Yet despite much bureaucratic obstruction, it was still possible for large numbers of ordinary German citizens to travel from one side of Germany to another. Between spring 1950 and spring 1961 13.1 million visits to West Germany were formally approved by the GDR's Volkspolizei, with 8.4 million in the opposite direction. Nevertheless, already in 1952, parallel with the so-called 'construction of socialism', severe restrictions were introduced on the number of visas issued to East Germans, resulting in considerable discontent, some of which contributed to the infamous uprising of 17 June 1953. In the wake of this, the regime liberalised travel, chiefly for train journeys across the 'mainland' border, only to see this loophole in the iron curtain abused by increasing numbers to abscond permanently from the GDR. Consequently, in December 1957 the authorities introduced swingeing new penalties (up to three years' imprisonment) for plans to depart the GDR illegally, and drastically reduced the legal option to leave. Moreover, the East German authorities had a tendency to penalise those relatives of defectors who stayed behind, either by denying their children places at university or putting them to the bottom of the housing queue, thus increasing the likelihood of a chain reaction of Republikflucht among friends and relations. As a consequence, East Germans sought more covert ways of abandoning socialism. The most obvious was Berlin: the inner-city border, intersected by hundreds of side-streets and undercut by the West Berlin-run subway system, proved impossible for the GDR authorities to control completely. 1958 thus saw a significant increase in the numbers fleeing via Berlin, as Figure 1 demonstrates, and from the spring of that year Berlin remained the preferred outlet.

**Fig. 1: Monthly Defections from the GDR via Berlin and the Inner-German Border, 1950–61**



Figures from the Federal Ministry of Refugees, Bundesarchiv Koblenz

1958 also witnessed a number of more hard-line domestic policies in the GDR which began to act as 'push factors' for key segments of the population. The politicisation of the university sector and threats to general practices started to alienate growing numbers of the so-called academic and medical intelligentsia. Increased pressure on church-going East Germans led to ever more accusations of anti-clerical discrimination, especially from schoolteachers. These pressures were reflected in increasing incidences of defections to the West. The East German Volkspolizei diligently passed on statistical totals of the brain-drain to their Soviet senior partners, who by August 1958 were beginning to show signs of concern that East Berlin was not master of the situation. ([5](http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/cold/articles/major.html#5))

To be fair to the East German leadership, it had realised that a fundamental cure had to address not only Republikflucht itself, but the causes of Republikflucht. Otherwise they would merely be shutting the gate after the horse had bolted. Despite the politicisation of sections of the population caused by the officially labelled 'transition to socialism' of 1958, it was recognised that the vast majority of leavers were going for economic reasons, seeking a higher standard of living in the West. What if the East could at least approximate the consumer experience which was luring so many away? Such, at least, was the thinking behind the 'economic main task', announced in July 1958, to overtake the West German 'economic miracle' within three years. ([6](http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/cold/articles/major.html#6)) (Admittedly part of this claim was sleight of hand: it was predicted that the West German economy would slump, allowing a modest increase in the GDR to overtake it; and GDR statisticians worked on the basis of West Germany's 1956/57 figures, not those of 1961!) Opinion reports on popular opinion within the GDR, however, reveal mounting incredulity over the regime's economic claims, with a definite sense that things were getting worse rather than better. When tackled by the party's agitprop apparatus on the high politics of the Berlin Crisis, most ordinary East Germans preferred to complain about the dire state of the economy. It would be a mistake, therefore, to think that the stuff of most Cold War history books, notably foreign policy, impinged greatly on grass-roots consciousness; but the rank and file's actions mattered immensely to those at the top. The western powers in turn were faced with mounting numbers of fleeing East Germans filling their reception camps, and in need of flying out to West Germany, but also posing a public relations embarrassment as the communists accused them of deliberately sabotaging socialism. Hard-line anti-communists may have relished seeing East Germans turning their backs on state socialism, but the official western line was that non-communists should hold out in the 'zone', pending the reunification of Germany. Otherwise the GDR would be stripped of a potential post-communist political and economic class.

Nevertheless, East Germany's economic functionaries had not chosen the best time to improve the provision of luxury items such as tropical fruits and real coffee, as well as fashion items, vacuum cleaners and scooters. In 1958 the GDR had finally ended the rationing system which had been in force since the end of the war. The result was a rush on goods in short supply and chronic shortages in many areas. It was thus not uncommon for bakeries to close at midday, or for butchers to be run out of sausages before shoppers had reached the end of the queue. At the time of Yuri Gagarin's first manned orbit in April 1961, aggrieved shoppers joked that comrade Gagarin would find more milk in the Milky Way than in the GDR. Party officials took to removing their party badges before joining queues. At the top too, a crash programme in making the GDR economy potentially autarkic of her West German big sister in the event of an embargo, was causing huge problems on shop-floors, increasing the likelihood of overburdened engineers and technicians heading west. A long stream of begging letters from East German leader Ulbricht to Khrushchev for Soviet subsidies to try to keep the consumer drive on target did result in substantial imports from the USSR, but not enough to make a difference. In the meantime the West German economy continued to expand apace. Thus, rather than stabilising the situation and giving potential leavers grounds for rethinking their plans to 'do a runner' ('abhauen'), the economic gamble appeared to be exacerbating the situation.

Of course, it is perfectly possible that the leaders involved in the various negotiations and bluffs of the second Berlin crisis may well have harboured the hope that their efforts would come to something, that for instance a western compromise solution might result in the diplomatic recognition of the GDR. Rather than achieving the maximum goals, a number of knock-on secondary targets might be met. It is certainly clear from Ulbricht's papers that he devoted most of his energies to foreign policy issues in this period; the internal affairs of the country were delegated to his deputy, Erich Honecker. Yet this does not mean that Ulbricht was necessarily in touch with reality. Indeed, the leadership proceeded from the voluntaristic assumption that political correctness in the realm of high politics would spur on workers to produce more domestically. There was much talk within the party of demonstrating to the populace the 'perspective' of socialism, which was party jargon for its longer-term viability, by showing that the world balance of power was tilting in favour of the East. Indeed, this was their fallback position when economic reforms were not working – if only there were more 'clarity in the heads' of East Germans about the inevitability of an eastern bloc victory, they would work harder. Nevertheless, communist agitprop officials detailed to discuss the foreign policy situation with ordinary East Germans often encountered diversionary tactics which pushed the discussion onto domestic issues: basics such as the food supply and the chronic housing shortage in the country. Thus, in the minds of most East Germans what mattered was the satisfaction of immediate economic needs, and often literally bread-and-butter issues, without whose resolution they would either drag their feet or vote with them and leave. Individually these may have been pinpricks against the system; but collectively one in six of the population had left the GDR by 1961, putting the regime in an impossible position in which it could not even calculate the current seven-year plan, unable to predict the labour pool still available in 1965.

Moreover, what the leadership did not seem to realise was that every time Berlin's international position was forced in the crisis, rather than reassuring the GDR citizenry, it had precisely the opposite effect. This point was not lost on communist officials closer to the ground, such as the Volkspolizei: 'The experience of the past years shows that every time the adversary [a classic Cold War displacement of agency onto the 'other'!] plays up the West Berlin question, a rise in Republikfluchten was ascertained.' ([7](http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/cold/articles/major.html#7)) In practice, this meant that the deadlocked crisis at the top was fostering uncertainty at the bottom, and was counter-productively raising the volatility of a footloose section of the population among the young and the ambitious. We can see this occurring at various points in the course of the crisis. When the Geneva summit failed to bring a resolution in 1959 this undermined hopes in a compromise solution (the phrase appears countless times in public opinion reports that 'both sides should take a step back'); when the Paris summit never even got underway because of the U-2 incident serious disaffection set in. Nor should we underestimate the very real fear of nuclear war erupting over Berlin; for some it did not feel safe to remain at what could so easily become the epicentre of a third world war. The classic articulation of this fear came in June 1961 when Ulbricht remarkably uttered the words that 'Nobody intends to build a wall'. Rather than reassuring the population, he merely accelerated the 'Torschlußpanik' or 'stampede for the exit'.

**Fig. 2: Monthly defections from the GDR by Occupation, 1952–61**



East German Volkspolizei figures from the Bundesarchiv Berlin

Perhaps more importantly, the economy began to get into serious difficulties in 1960. As Figure 2 shows, the forced collectivisation of East German agriculture in spring 1960, largely driven on by the political careerism of provincial officials, ([8](http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/cold/articles/major.html#8)) caused a huge increase in the number of farmers absconding, which only worsened the food shortages. But if we look closely, other key groups such as the intelligentsia, that is engineers, doctors and educationalists, were leaving, as well as disproportionately many white-collar administrators. In 1960 the leading plants of the GDR's chemicals industry began to suffer particularly high Republikflucht and by the beginning of 1961 East German economics officials were having to warn Moscow that their car factories were only working half days and that a 'series of other plants were facing closure'. ([9](http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/cold/articles/major.html#9)) This economic paralysis created significant push factors for East Germans who would probably otherwise have put up with the political chicanery of the system, but who had frequently had their expectations raised by excellent vocational training, only to find themselves playing cards while waiting for raw materials to arrive at the production line, and paying for the privilege by reduced wage packets. Therefore, a strong case can be made for the claim that the GDR's clumsy efforts to introduce a more productive system, which in fact swallowed up much short-term capital for the medium-term good, actually worsened the economic situation in the period 1958–61. The Soviet Union and other eastern bloc countries saw themselves becoming permanent blood donors to the haemophiliac GDR, bleeding dry of labour power. Instead, although it would prove a propaganda gift to the West, the cheaper solution was an amputation of West Berlin from its hinterland, by the drastic measure of an eight-foot high wall.

In the final stages of the open border crisis, desperate efforts were made to seal off all of Berlin with a human cordon, a tall order, since East Berlin was the capital of the GDR and hub of its transport network. Earlier proposals for the diversion of long-distance trains around Berlin, and lengthy border controls of S- and U-Bahn traffic, had been rejected. ([10](http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/cold/articles/major.html#10)) Even in 1960 the Volkspolizei was limited to monitoring Berlin-bound vehicles 'under the pretext of technical checks'. ([11](http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/cold/articles/major.html#11)) The transport police instigated 'train escort kommandos' equipped with wanted lists, on the look-out for farmers, young persons and families. Special holding compartments collected suspects. Besides its local constables and Auxiliary Volunteers, the police involved agencies such as mayors, employers, banks and post-offices. Parcels were confiscated in their tens of thousands. The Stasi recruited informers among taxi ranks and railway ticket offices. Anybody selling off property such as cars was automatically investigated and the secret police took to interviewing would-be absconders as a psychological deterrent. ([12](http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/cold/articles/major.html#12)) Thus, between May 1960, when the new stringency began, and the building of the Wall, over 50,000 persons were detained by the authorities, suspected of trying to flee. For every one held, however, six managed to evade the police cordon. As the Stasi concluded, 'a comprehensive sealing-off of West Berlin is not possible and therefore the combatting of Republikflucht cannot be left to the security organs of the GDR alone'. ([13](http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/cold/articles/major.html#13)) It was in the wake of this domestic failure that the leaders and diplomats could seek a way out what was a largely self-made crisis.

More generally, future Cold War historians may wish to ask how they can fit the regional politics and societies of the Cold War's battlegrounds together with the centres of power. Indeed, it might be argued that the global scope of the Cold War forced both superpowers into a form of imperial overreach in which they became reliant on, and sometimes prisoners of, their junior allies. In the case of the Soviet Union and the GDR, it would appear that the East Germans took their superpower patron at its word about the acquisition of West Berlin. As Hope Harrison has shown, Ulbricht was quite capable of unilaterally upping the ante by instituting his own temporary border controls, such as in September 1960, much to the aggravation of the Soviet embassy. Yet what is still missing from such accounts is the East German communists' overestimation of the control which they had over their own population. Just as the Soviets were to some extent prisoners of one of their geopolitically crucial allies, where the bulk of their European forces were stationed, the German communists were captives of their own inhabitants. Key groups without whom they could not hope to build socialism, such as doctors and engineers, and who were not the communists' natural class allies, had to be effectively bribed to stay in the GDR. This unequal treatment, despite the egalitarian claims of state socialism, caused immense resentment among East German workers and farmers. The party was generally seen to be 'on the defensive' on the eve of the Wall, with local party officials frequently stung into silence by hostile workplace meetings. Even after the Wall's erection on 13 August 1961, the party could not resist the temptation to use selective access to the West for the privileged few as a carrot for good behaviour. As one recent social history has claimed, the GDR operated as a 'participatory dictatorship', and it would be wrong to ascribe the people a totally passive role. ([14](http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/cold/articles/major.html#14)) Especially at this juncture in the GDR's history, while its border was still open – and we should not forget that for over a third of its existence East Germany had to live with an open border – a substantial minority of the population were collectively able to hold the state to ransom. ([15](http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/cold/articles/major.html#15)) The second Berlin crisis should therefore be viewed as an episode in which the calculations of the eastern political elites misfired spectacularly, but it was not only the Whitehouse and its allies which created the dead-end into which Kennedy and Ulbricht manoeuvred; seventeen million East Germans created a set of variables in the crisis which defied rational crisis-management. Although nobody would say it publicly in the West, the Berlin Wall removed this destabilising factor from the Cold War and a collective sigh of relief was heaved since, unlike the previous world conflagration, a new refugee crisis would not become the pretext for a third world war.

**Notes:**

1. A typical recent example is Rolf Steininger, *Der Mauerbau: Die Westmächte und Adenauer in der Berlinkrise 1958–1963* (Munich, 2001). [Back to (1)](http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/cold/articles/major.html%22%20%5Cl%20%221t)
2. John P. S. Gearson, *Harold Macmillan and the Berlin Wall Crisis, 1958–62: the Limits of Interest and Force* (Basingstoke, 1998). [Back to (2)](http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/cold/articles/major.html%22%20%5Cl%20%222t)
3. Hope M. Harrison, *Driving the Soviets up the Wall: Soviet-East German Relations, 1953–1961* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford, 2003). [Back to (3)](http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/cold/articles/major.html%22%20%5Cl%20%223t)
4. Among the more inclusive, if speculative, James Richter, *Khrushchev's Double Bind: International Pressure and Domestic Coalition Politics* (Baltimore, Md, 1994); among those which pursue a nuclear idée fixe: Michael Beschloss, *The Crisis Years: Kennedy and Khrushchev 1960–1963* (New York, 1991). [Back to (4)](http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/cold/articles/major.html%22%20%5Cl%20%224t)
5. Harrison, *Driving the Soviets*, p. 100. [Back to (5)](http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/cold/articles/major.html%22%20%5Cl%20%225t)
6. André Steiner, *Von Plan zu Plan: Eine Wirtschaftsgeschichte der DDR* (Munich, 2004), pp. 100–05. [Back to (6)](http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/cold/articles/major.html%22%20%5Cl%20%226t)
7. 'Stand und Entwicklung der Bevölkerungsbewegung im Jahre 1960', 13 Feb. 1961, Bundesarchiv Berlin, DO–1/11/967, fos. 37–60. [Back to (7)](http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/cold/articles/major.html%22%20%5Cl%20%227t)
8. Arnd Bauerkämper, *Ländliche Gesellschaft in der kommunistischen Diktatur: Zwangsmodernisierung und Tradition in Brandenburg 1945–1963* (Cologne, 2002), pp. 185–6. [Back to (8)](http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/cold/articles/major.html%22%20%5Cl%20%228t)
9. Leuschner to Ulbricht, 30 Jan. 1961, Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR-Bundeaarchiv, DY 30/J IV 2/202/30. [Back to (9)](http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/cold/articles/major.html%22%20%5Cl%20%229t)
10. Ministerium für Staatssicherheit (MfS, Chef der Transportpolizei), 'Vorschläge .', 17 Feb. 1956, SAPMO-BA, DY 30/IV2/13/397. [Back to (10)](http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/cold/articles/major.html%22%20%5Cl%20%2210t)
11. Hauptverwaltung Deutsche Volkspolizei (Kripo), 'Thesen .', 7 July 1960, BA, DO–1/34/21721. [Back to (11)](http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/cold/articles/major.html%22%20%5Cl%20%2211t)
12. MfS-ZAIG, 'Bericht über die Entwicklung der Republikflucht 1960 ...', 28 Oct. 1960, BStU–ZA, ZAIG 247, fos. 70–114. [Back to (12)](http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/cold/articles/major.html%22%20%5Cl%20%2212t)
13. MfS–ZAIG, 'Bericht über die Entwicklung der Republikflucht im Zeitraum Oktober-Dezember 1960 ...', 3 Feb. 1961, BStU–ZA, ZAIG 412, fo. 4. [Back to (13)](http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/cold/articles/major.html%22%20%5Cl%20%2213t)
14. Mary Fulbrook, *The People's State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker* (New Haven and London, 2005), p. 12. [Back to (14)](http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/cold/articles/major.html%22%20%5Cl%20%2214t)
15. Corey Ross, '"... sonst sehe ich mich veranlasst, auch nach dem Westen zu ziehen": "Republikflucht", SED-Herrschaft und Bevölkerung vor dem Mauerbau', *Deutschland-Archiv*, 34 (2001), 613–27. [Back to (15)](http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/cold/articles/major.html%22%20%5Cl%20%2215t)

Name:

Professor Patrick Major

Job Title:

Professor

Responsibilities:

I am chair of exams and teach two optional courses on 'Warrior Nation: Prussia and Germany, 1740-1945' and 'Cold War Berlin: Politics and Culture in a Divided City'.

I would be glad to supervise any research student with an interest in the history of modern Germany, the world wars, the Cold War, film history and popular cultural history.

Areas of Interest:

My research interests are primarily the political, social and cultural history of divided Germany in the Cold War. I have recently completed a large project on the rise and fall of the Berlin Wall. I am currently undertaking a project on Anglo-American and German film depictions of 'bad Nazis' and 'good Germans', which has been funded by the British Academy.