



Berlin 1961: Kennedy, Khrushchev, and the Most Dangerous Place on Earth

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In June 1961, Nikita Khrushchev called Berlin "the most dangerous place on earth." He knew what he was talking about.

Much has been written about the Cuban Missile Crisis a year later, but the Berlin Crisis of 1961 was more decisive in shaping the Cold War-and more perilous. It was in that hot summer that the Berlin Wall was constructed, which would divide the world for another twenty-eight years. Then two months later, and for the first time in history, American and Soviet fighting men and tanks stood arrayed against each other, only yards apart. One mistake, one nervous soldier, one overzealous commander-and the tripwire would be sprung for a war that could go nuclear in a heartbeat.

On one side was a young, untested U.S. president still reeling from the Bay of Pigs disaster and a humiliating summit meeting that left him grasping for ways to respond. It would add up to be one of the worst first-year foreign policy performances of any modern president. On the other side, a Soviet premier hemmed in by the Chinese, East Germans, and hardliners in his own government. With an all-important Party Congress approaching, he knew Berlin meant the difference not only for the Kremlin's hold on its empire-but for his own hold on the Kremlin.

Neither man really understood the other, both tried cynically to manipulate events. And so, week by week, they crept closer to the brink.

Based on a wealth of new documents and interviews, filled with fresh-sometimes startling-insights, written with immediacy and drama, *Berlin 1961* is an extraordinary look at key events of the twentieth century, with powerful applications to these early years of the twenty-first.

Includes photographs

Berlin 1961: Kennedy, Khrushchev, and the Most Dangerous Place on Earth Details

Date : Published May 10th 2011 by Berkley

ISBN :

Author : Frederick Kempe

Format : Kindle Edition 608 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, Politics, Cultural, Germany



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From Reader Review Berlin 1961: Kennedy, Khrushchev, and the Most Dangerous Place on Earth for online ebook

Buddy Flowers says

Reads just like a spy thriller!

Zohar - ManOfLaBook.com says

“Berlin 1961” by Frederick Kempe is a non-fiction book which follows the political turmoil in 1961, a defining year in US-Soviet relationship. Nikita Khrushchev called Berlin “the most dangerous place on earth”, reading this book I found out why.

The book is divided into 3 parts:

Part I: “The Players” – the author introduced Nikita Khrushchev, John F. Kennedy, Walter Ulbricht and Konrad Adenauer. Mr. Kempe brings out their motivations and fear for the drama that is being staged.

Part II: “The Gathering Storm” – After the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, Kennedy’s political clout and respect among world leaders is at a low point, to say the least. Khrushchev sees this as his opportunity to stop the massive exodus from East Germany and closes the border. Kennedy’s admittedly poor performance is on display while he tries to ensure that Khrushchev doesn’t start a nuclear war.

Part III: “The Showdown” – This, for me, was the highlight of the book. The decisions in Moscow which resulted in a stunning border closure and its aftermath.

“Berlin 1961” by Frederick Kempe follows the events that shaped the course of the Cold War. The author juxtaposed between four of the major players — Nikita Khrushchev, John F. Kennedy, East Berlin mayor Walter Ulbricht and West Berlin mayor Konrad Adenauer.

Kennedy and Khrushchev were, to me, the most interesting viewpoints of the book. Khrushchev’s bullying the young President while faking diplomacy should probably be studied in all political science courses. Reading how Nikita Khrushchev danced in diplomatic circles around the inexperienced Kennedy, who was just learning his job at the time was fascinating. Kennedy breaking his diplomatic chops on a very serious matter is an aspect which helped him tremendously when it came to other diplomatic breaking points such as the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Mr. Kempe provides in depth analysis on the intrigue which occurred during 1961 as well as more intimate moments of triumph and anguish on all sides of the political spectrum. For Kennedy, 1961 was a strenuous year. Kennedy described that year as “a string of disasters” starting with the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion, the failed Vienna Summit, the Berlin Wall put under his nose as well as a dangerous tank showdown in Checkpoint Charlie.

I found it fascinating that Kennedy, for all intents and purposes, allowed Khrushchev to construct the wall as long as he did not disrupt West Berlin or access to Freedom.

Of course, the wall did both.

Mr. Kempe argues that one of the most significant outcomes of 1961 was the perceived weakness

Khrushchev found in Kennedy. That weakness prompted him to place missiles in Cuba thinking the young President would cave as he did in Berlin.

This is a fascinating book which brings historic figures to life. I am always fascinated by how decisions in the upper echelons of power are being made, for me books like this are a gold mine.

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Mario says

Incredibly riveting all the way through, and especially after the part where the wall goes up. Should be required reading for anyone who wants to understand the Cold War. It delves deep enough into the Berlin situation to illustrate the complexity of handling an international crisis. It also does an excellent job of highlighting what the key figures, particularly Kennedy and Khrushchev, did right and where they made mistakes.

Robert Morrow says

4.5 stars (out of 5).

The quality I have admired most in President Kennedy was his ability to grow, to learn from his mistakes. This is the story of many of his early mistakes. The source of those mistakes was brilliantly identified by the author as Kennedy not wanting to deal with the problem he had inherited in Berlin (much like President Obama not wanting to deal with the problem he had inherited in the economy), but almost trying to wish it away so he could deal with what he considered more important issues.

Kempe is a fine writer who is not afraid to spice up the narrative with wry, ironic humor from time to time. At times the book is a genuine page turner, particularly those dealing with the construction of the wall and the historic faceoff at Checkpoint Charlie. For the most part, the book is an engrossing, intelligent analysis of the relationships and thinking of the four key players and how the chess game played itself out. The final analysis is a bit disappointing in terms of certain what-ifs, but I do not want to spoil the author's conclusion.

Again I wish Goodreads at a half-star option: this was a 4.5 star book.

Brandon Forsyth says

This book does an admirable job in providing an overview of the personalities and conflicts that shaped the creation of the Berlin Wall, but it is less successful at subjecting all involved to a similar level of critical rigour. Kempe paints Kennedy's fears of nuclear armageddon as crippling and emasculating, and there is a fawning appreciation of the more hawkish members of the administration and armed services that I found distasteful. Ultimately I found it unconvincing, but it is certainly well researched and gave me a few things to check out when I visit Berlin!

Margaret Sankey says

Using more recently available Russian and declassified material, Kempe offers a contextualized account of the Berlin Wall crisis, emphasizing its place among the Bay of Pigs, space launches, Cuban Missile Crisis, Eichmann in Jerusalem, Chinese overtures to East Germany and Albania, Civil War in Laos and lingering bad feelings from Budapest and Suez. There are nice nods to the important details of diplomacy (Adenauer's birthday gifts, reading the tea leaves of seating assignments, quoting your potential ally's book) and the role of personality (LBJ hosts Adenauer at the ranch, Acheson and Macmillan compare tailors).

Tony says

I love winning Goodreads Giveaways. Not because I get it for free but because I get it first!

Time it was and what a time it was. It was.

The power and weapons of one country controlled by one man: a bully, a binge drinker, a man who felt it insignificant to detonate millions of people, and a man who felt the political pressure of appearing weak. The power and weapons of another country controlled by one man: an indiscriminate sex addict, juiced on amphetamines, steroids, testosterone, phenobarbital, cocaine and hormonal concoctions, with a shallow, theoretical understanding of geopolitics, a man who felt the political pressure of appearing weak. Actors, playing a part. The play was *Berlin 1961*.

The Berlin created by the defeat of Germany in 1945 was a fundamental mistake. You can't create a country miles away in a conference room, with a pencil, a map and a straight-edge. Divide a country up, on paper no less, and the absurdity should be manifest. Yet, post-bellum Germany was fractured based not on language, ethnicity or heritage, but by political philosophy.

Stupid. Pointless, all of it. And yet, 50 years ago, two leaders, in over their heads, almost blew us up.

There are different ways to tell this tale, like a conductor's 'read' of a well-known score. Frederick Kempe tells this story well, in an almost day by day fashion. I might have given Khrushchev's American tour more comedy and Kennedy's speech at the Berlin Wall more *brio*. But Kempe got it right in my view. I like his ultimate verdict - that Kennedy's lack of fortitude in Berlin, 1961 went a long way to ensuring the length of the Cold War - better than, say, Beschloss, who thematically insisted on labelling Kennedy bad at crisis avoidance but brilliant at crisis management. History by soundbite.

For all of Kennedy's missteps, however, the guy could give one helluva speech. At the Berlin Wall, he soared. *Lasst Sie nacht Berlin kommen.*

And that is why, after revisiting that terrifying time, I can say with absolute certainty that I too am a jelly donut.

Jonny Ruddock says

The story of how the newly elected President Kennedy handed the Communist Bloc the initiative in the fate of Berlin, and how the world was set up for a nuclear trip wire the following year.

The book follows Khrushchev, Kennedy, Adenauer and Ulbricht as the latter two continually force the hand of their respective sponsors over the fate of Berlin, and the way the two superpowers handle, or mishandle, the resulting diplomacy.

I thought this was a very good book, filling an important gap in my knowledge and written in a non-partisan manner. I only wish it had been around in the early 90's, when I was studying American Politics of the period. And that just if it had been, I'd have had the sense to read it.

Doubledf99.99 says

A fascinating read and a very well researched book, on a high vis potential flashpoint. Brings back the WHY, as why we were getting under our school desks, and neighbors were digging up their backyards. Kennedy had a rough start in his young administration on the foreign affairs front, the first being the Bay of Pigs, the second Berlin. This book goes into fine detail of all the players, on both sides of the Atlantic and of course the epicenter Berlin, that came darn close to starting WWIII.

Joe says

The Berlin Wall was a symbol, if not the symbol, of all that was wrong with communism. The monstrosity built not to protect its populace, but rather to stem the mass exodus of East Germans, (4 million from 1946-1961), for fairer pastures west. The Wall constructed literally to trap its citizens within and a constant and very physical reminder - until it came down in 1989 - of communist oppression. Growing up and somewhat ignorant of international politics and ideology during the '60's and 70's, the Berlin Wall was The Iron Curtain for me.

With the release of new materials from the US and Soviet archives the author does an excellent job in providing a detailed narrative of the decision to build and the actual construction of the Wall. Just as critical, Berlin 1961, provides the context behind this infamous historical event. Although most of us seem to remember the partitioning of Berlin as an overnight event, the Wall not only took weeks to build, but was years in the making. Dating back to the end of World War II with the constant emigration from East to West, this outflow of humanity was a chronic communist problem that needed to be "plugged". Kennedy and Khrushchev were in the international spotlight at the time of the crisis, but behind the scenes East German General Secretary Walter Ulbricht was the "tail wagging the bear", manipulating the Soviet leader into action as he watched his "dream" of a totalitarian communist Germany drain away. Without Ulbricht it's difficult to envision The Berlin Wall. (One can only hope Ulbricht now occupies a special place in Hell for his special communist monument.)

I had some issues with the author's hindsight and analysis of an indecisive President Kennedy. Not even a

year into office and reeling after The Bay of Pigs and the Vienna Summit, where he was bullied by Khrushchev, Kennedy was caught flat-footed – to say the least – by the Berlin crisis. Yet it's difficult to assign him all the blame. The US military, intelligence community and particularly the State Department were all taken by surprise. And although the Western Allies – DeGaulle (France), Macmillan (Great Britain), and Adenauer (“West” Germany) - had “advice” for the new young President, it was JFK's finger on the proverbial red button, and the associated risk of global nuclear Armageddon. And if one is looking for historical figures who had dismal first years in office, Abraham Lincoln and Winston Churchill come to mind.

So although Kennedy might have been able to do “more” in stopping the building of The Wall, this hindsight presupposes preparation and the US was woefully unprepared. A non-nuclear military confrontation – especially with Ulbricht behind the scenes – could have quickly escalated into nuclear disaster. (As Brent Scowcroft states in this book's introduction – “History, sadly, does not reveal its alternatives.”) What should also be taken into account is Kennedy's 70+ % approval rating at the time, and that past and future Presidents “contained” rather than directly confronted similar Soviet actions – the 1953 and 1956 uprisings in Berlin and Hungary (Eisenhower); Prague Spring in 1968 (LBJ); and the occupation of Poland in 1981 (Reagan). On the other hand I do agree with the author that this Berlin crisis of 1961 set the stage for Cuban Missile Crisis of a year later.

Bottom line though, this is an excellent narrative of a pivotal moment in Cold War history – Highly recommended.

Hadrian says

History as a thrilling narrative. The Berlin crisis is one that is strangely overlooked in most modern retellings of the Cold War. This book tells the story well - on a day by day basis, covering all the major players, in a well-researched and flowing narrative.

It is a chilling case of history, not only from its own tensions - even worse than the Cuban missile Crisis in some aspects - but that it is forgotten from history by some. Events like this are too dangerous to forget.

Jason Dikes says

This is an excellent history of not only Berlin's crisis of 1961, but the dance between JFK and Khruschev that had been going on since 1960. The only problem I have is with one of the books two conclusions.

The first conclusion is that JFK's weakness over Berlin led to the Cuban Missile Crisis. Absolutely. I don't think Khruschev would have taken the risk without Kennedy's weakness over Berlin and Bay of Pigs.

The second conclusion is a hypothesis that if JFK had stood up to the Soviet Union over Berlin and not allowed the Berlin Wall to become permanent, then perhaps Soviet domination of Eastern Europe would have been cut shorter, maybe by decades. This seems to be an overreach. Considering how brutally the Soviets had already put down uprisings in 1953 and 1956, I can't see their grip loosening over Berlin.

John says

Historians of the Cold War have regarded as its worst crisis, the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, often citing it as its most significant event. However, in his "Berlin 1961: Kennedy, Khrushchev, And The Most Dangerous Place On Earth", former journalist Frederick Kempe has made a most compelling case instead for the confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Berlin Wall's construction in the late summer and early fall of 1961, culminating in a standoff between American and Soviet tanks at Checkpoint Charlie in late October. Kempe has written such an extraordinary work of historical and political science scholarship that this book deserves ample recognition as an instant classic of Cold War history, and one which will be remembered by present and future generations of historians and political scientists. Moreover, Kempe tells such a compelling tale that readers might err in thinking that this is a Len Deighton or John Le Carre novel, not a substantial tome of historical nonfiction. Quoting from General Brent Scowcroft's elegant Introduction, "Fred Kempe's contribution to our crucial understanding of that time is that he combines the "You Are There" storytelling skills of a journalist, the analytical skills of a political scientist, and the historian's use of declassified U.S., Soviet, and German documents to provide unique insight into the forces and individuals behind the construction of the Berlin Wall-----the iconic barrier that came to symbolize the Cold War's divisions."

Kempe's book will be regarded by many as provocative, especially to those possessing a favorable view of John F. Kennedy's presidency. If nothing else, "Berlin 1961" is a most damning indictment of Kennedy's woeful inexperience and ignorance with regards to foreign policy; indeed, one could draw unflattering parallels between Kennedy's handling of American foreign policy in 1961, especially with regards to the Soviet Union and its allies, with those of the current President. Relying on recently declassified American, Soviet and German documents, as well as from other sources, Kempe demonstrates how Kennedy misinterpreted initial peaceful overtures from Khrushchev, and then how Kennedy was outwitted by Khrushchev, first at their ill-fated Vienna summit, and then, months later, as the crisis in Berlin pushed the United States and the Soviet Union toward the brink of nuclear war. Moreover, he explains how Kennedy's response to the Berlin Wall's construction was effectively, Kennedy's acquiescence in keeping the status quo, recognizing as permanent, a divided Germany and a Europe divided between the Western NATO democracies and the Soviet-dominated Warsaw Pact totalitarian dictatorships, or rather, as Kempe himself concludes, "What Kennedy could not undo was the Wall that had risen as he passively stood by, which for three decades and perhaps for all of history would remain the iconic image of what unfree systems can impose when free leaders fail to resist." He offers a most gripping portrayal of a Kennedy administration at war with itself, between "doves" and "hawks", between the likes of United States ambassador to the Soviet Union E. Llewellyn "Tommy" Thompson and former United States Secretary of State Dean Acheson. Equally compelling is Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev's strained relationship with East German leader Walter Ulbricht, which demonstrates that it was Ulbricht, not Khrushchev, who was most responsible for the Berlin Wall's construction, having drafted its plans weeks before obtaining the Soviet leader's approval. And yet, readers may regard as most memorable, the graphic accounts of East Berliners who risked death, in their attempts at gaining freedom across the Berlin Wall during its construction.

Corey Preston says

Slow and overwrought.

And the fixation on dinging/damaging Kennedy is weird and forced. I understand the need to have a "thesis" for something like this, but once Kempe drops his--which is basically that Kennedy was a disaster and could have ended the Soviet Union in 1961 without firing a shot--it becomes hard to trust his reporting or sense of scope on other matters.

Mr. Kempe makes a big stink about a suggestion, made after the fact, that the U.S. could have bowled the wall over with tanks when construction began. This would have caused, in Mr. Kempe's mind, the Soviets to just back down, and eventually agree to reunification. Given Khrushchev's obsession with Berlin, that seems like a stretch. Obviously there's no saying what ripple effect a more direct confrontation in Berlin would have had, but Mr. Kempe's fantasy that the Soviets would have wet themselves and backed off seems pretty unlikely. And the alternative, just as likely if not more, was pretty damned devastating. Both the U.S. and USSR were convinced that the time might come, any day, for a preemptive nuclear strike. Kennedy was presented plans for either (a) a massive strike on Russia, killing 100 million, and STILL leaving some potential for the USSR to wipe out Paris; or (b) a lesser strike, killing 1 million or so, with far higher odds of a full on nuclear war.

Mr. Kempe wants us to think that Berlin was THE turning point, that it emboldened Khrushchev to put missiles in Cuba, and allowed the communist bloc to stay afloat by ending the refugee problem with the GDR. But his reporting undermines that. If anything, Berlin seems more like a necessary cog in the process--Khrushchev treated Berlin as the whole ballgame, was hellbent on fixing the refugee problem, and all of his allies/political pressure points were pushing him towards MORE provocation; Kennedy wasn't sure Berlin was worth starting a world war, most of his allies agreed, and those that didn't expected the U.S. to bear the entire brunt of any action. Given that wild imbalance of incentives, it is not hard to see why things played out the way they did (and why Kennedy did show sufficient "backbone" when the incentive on his end was upped significantly a year later in Cuba).

Scottnshana says

I am consistently surprised and switched on at all the "inside baseball" histories written recently about events we studied in high school history class. Usually it's a British historian who accessed some archives that were off-limits during the Cold War and it usually reveals that things were a lot more complicated than we were led to believe in that high school textbook. Kempe, however, is an American, an award-winning journalist (e.g., Wall Street Journal), and now President of a foreign policy think tank in DC. What he has accomplished with "Berlin 1961" is superlative. First of all, the book elucidates the fact that the principal players on both sides of Checkpoint Charlie did NOT get along all that well, and all of them were practicing realpolitik as the tanks squared off and the Wall sprang up. Khrushchev, Mao, and Ulbricht, for instance, were not the monolithic Red alliance, and each of them was working for the perceived best interests of his respective nation, subtly and often at the expense of the others. MacMillan in London, De Gaulle in Paris, Adenauer in Bonn, and Brandt in Berlin itself were also doing so while repeatedly ruminating on what NATO membership entails in the face of the book's looming Cold War crisis. The book tees up the "13 Days" movie nicely, as Kempe discusses the back-channel work Bobby Kennedy was conducting via a Soviet journalist/intel officer from the Embassy in DC as well as the tension between the Joint Chiefs and JFK's top civilian advisors (to include retired General Lucius Clay, whom President Kennedy sent back to Berlin and who complicated the entire situation by inserting himself into a complex military chain of command). The more I read about President Kennedy himself, though, the more complex the picture. Like the book's principal topic and the other world leaders involved, JFK was far more complex than Camelot and "Profiles in Courage", and Kempe effectively describes that. I think this book is worth reading, especially in light of current European events, and—again—I think it provides an essential understanding for any objective look at the Cuban Missile Crisis (my personal favorite is "One Minute to Midnight: Kennedy,

Khrushchev, and Castro on the Brink of Nuclear War” by Michael Dobbs) or the Berlin Airlift (i.e., “The Candy Bombers” by Andrei Cherny). Recommend.
