



Volume 9. Two Germanies, 1961-1989

West Berlin Mayor Willy Brandt's Appeal to the U.S. President (August 15, 1961)

Frustrated by the lack of a decisive American response to the building of the Wall, West Berlin Mayor Willy Brandt tries to make President John F. Kennedy more aware of its dire psychological effect on West Berlin's population. Brandt asks for active countermeasures in order to restore confidence in the West's commitment to the beleaguered city.

---

[...]

The measures taken by the Ulbricht regime, backed by the Soviet Union and the rest of the Eastern Bloc, have almost completely destroyed the remnants of [Berlin's] Four-Power status. In the past, the commanders of the Allied Powers in Berlin protested against parades by the so-called People's Army [*Volksarmee*]; now, after the military occupation of the Eastern sector by the People's Army, they must content themselves with a belated and not very vigorous *démarche*. The illegal sovereignty of the East Berlin government has been recognized by tolerating the restrictions on border crossings and access to the Eastern sector. I regard this as a serious cleft in the postwar history of this city, the likes of which has not been seen since the blockade.

This development has not changed the West Berlin population's will to resist, but it has lent itself to doubts about the ability of the Three Powers to react resolutely. So it is decisive that the West has always appealed to the existing Four-Power status [of Berlin]. I am well aware that current guarantees for the freedom of the population, the presence of troops, and free access apply only to West Berlin. Nevertheless, we are dealing with a profound cleft in the life of the German people, and with a forced expulsion from areas of joint responsibility affecting Western prestige as a whole.

I see a two-fold political-psychological danger:

1. Inactivity and pure defensiveness could elicit a crisis of confidence with regard to the Western powers.
2. Inactivity and pure defensiveness could lead to excessive self-confidence on the part of the East Berlin regime, which is already boasting about the success of its demonstration of military power in today's editions of its newspapers.

By deploying the German People's Army, the Soviet Union has already achieved half of its proposals with respect to giving Berlin the status of a Free City. The second act is only a matter of time. After the second act, there will be a Berlin that resembles a ghetto, that has not only lost its function as a refuge of freedom and a symbol of hope for reunification, but has also been cut off from the free part of Germany. Then, instead of a movement of refugees toward Berlin, we will experience a flight out of Berlin.

In this situation, I would considerate it appropriate for the Western powers, while demanding the restoration of Four-Power responsibility, to simultaneously proclaim a Three-Power status for West Berlin. The Three Powers should reiterate their guarantee to remain present in West Berlin until German reunification and, if necessary, allow that guarantee to be backed up by a referendum put to the people of West Berlin and the Federal Republic. We also need a clear statement that the German question has by no means been settled for the Western powers, that rather they will emphatically insist on a peaceful resolution that accords with the German people's right to self-determination and the security interests of all those concerned. Furthermore, I would regard it as a good thing if the West, through its own initiative, were to bring the subject of Berlin before the United Nations, at least on the grounds that the Soviet Union has violated the Declaration of Human Rights in an egregious manner. To me, it seems better to place the Soviet Union under indictment than to have to discuss the same subject along the lines established by the motions of other states.

I do not expect that such steps will bring any substantive material changes in the current situation, and I cannot think without bitterness about that declaration that rejected negotiations with the Soviet Union on the grounds that one should not negotiate under pressure. We now have a situation of perfect blackmail, and I am already hearing that one will not be able to reject negotiations. In a situation like this, it is all the more important to show at least some political initiative, when the chances for an initiative are small enough already.

After tolerating a Soviet measure that is illegal and has been designated as illegal, and in light of the many tragedies that are taking place today in East Berlin and in the Soviet Zone, none of us will be spared the risk of ultimate resoluteness. I would welcome it if the American garrison could be reinforced in demonstrable form.

[...]

Source: Willy Brandt on the Building of the Berlin Wall, August 15, 1961; original German letter reprinted in Bernhard Pollmann, ed., *Lesebuch zur deutschen Geschichte* [German History Reader], vol. 3, *Vom deutschen Reich bis zur Gegenwart* [From the German Reich to the Present]. Dortmund, 1984, pp. 242-44.

Translation: Jeremiah Riemer