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John Foster Dulles on the Possibility of Negotiations with the GDR (November 26, 1958)

In light of the most recent Berlin crisis, which had been brought about by the Soviet ultimatum demanding that the Western powers withdraw from Berlin, American Secretary of State John Foster Dulles made it clear to journalists that the United States would never agree to a transfer of Soviet rights in Berlin to the government of the GDR and that it would not recognize the GDR as a state. At the same time, however, Dulles' restrained reaction already pointed to the line the Western powers would take in negotiations in the coming months. The Western powers did not respond to Soviet demands. At the same time, however, they also downplayed the uncompromising nature of the demands, thereby allowing Khrushchev to make a diplomatic retreat without losing face.

Remarks at News Conference by Secretary of State Dulles, on Berlin, November 26, 1958

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Q. Mr. Secretary, what is the position of the United States and the other powers on the question of dealing with any East German official who might be in a position previously held by a Soviet official?

A. The position of the United States, and I think I can fairly say of the United Kingdom and of France, is that there is an obligation, an explicit obligation, on the part of the Soviet Union to assure to the United States, and to the other Allied powers, and, indeed, to the world generally, normal access to and egress from Berlin.

And that is the responsibility of the Soviet Union. It was expressed explicitly at the time of the Council of Foreign Ministers Meeting held in Paris in June of 1949, following, you will recall, the end of the Berlin blockade and the consequent airlift. At that time the Four Powers exchanged what were formally called "obligations" to assure these rights.

We do not accept the view that the Soviet Union can disengage itself from that responsibility. And, indeed, that responsibility was in essence reaffirmed at the time of the Summit Meeting of July, 1955, when the Four Powers recognized their "responsibility" for the German question.

That phrase "the German question" has always been held to include the question of Berlin. And so, again, you had a reaffirmation by the Soviet Union of its responsibility in the matter. We do not accept any substitute responsibility, in that situation, for that of the Soviet Union.

Q. Mr. Secretary, what if, despite this responsibility, the Soviets go ahead and turn over to the East German authorities the check points on the Autobahn and control to the land, sea, and air routes? Now the question would arise: would we deal with the East German officials who would man the check points, for example, even as—

A. Well, we would certainly not deal with them in any way which involved our acceptance of the East German Regime as a substitute for the Soviet Union in discharging the obligation of the Soviet Union and the responsibility of the Soviet Union.

Q. Does that mean that we might deal with them as agents of the Soviet Union?

A. We might, yes. There are certain respects now in which minor functionaries of the so-called GDR are being dealt with by both the Western Powers, the three allied powers, and also by the Federal Republic of Germany.

It all depends upon the details of just how they act and how they function. You can't exclude that to a minor degree because it is going on at the present time and has been. On the other hand, if the character of the activity is such as to indicate that to accept this would involve acceptance of a substitution of the GDR for the present obligation and responsibility of the Soviet Union, then that, I take it, we would not do.

Q. Mr. Secretary, can you deal with them in such a way as to make a distinction between dealing with them as agents of the Soviet Union and dealing with them in such a way as to imply a kind of de facto recognition of their existence?

A. I think that that certainly could be done. We often deal with people that we do not recognize diplomatically, deal with them on a practical basis. Of course, we do that with the Chinese Communists in a number of respects. And, as I pointed out, both the Federal Republic of Germany and the rest of us have, in certain practical matters, for many months been dealing with minor functionaries of the GDR with respect to what might be called perfunctory, routine matters.

Q. Mr. Secretary, you say we might deal with the East Germans as agents of the Soviet Union. Is that a matter of agreed policy between the three Western Powers and the Federal Republic, or only something that is possible?

A. I think that it is agreed between us that we *might*.

But, as I say, the question of whether we would or would not, would have to depend upon the precise circumstances which surround the action, and that can't be anticipated in advance of knowing what, if anything, the Soviet Union is going to do.

Q. Mr. Secretary, supposedly authoritative dispatches from Bonn in the last few days have reflected a concern on the part of Chancellor Adenauer's Government that the Western Big Three would not "hang on tough" so to speak in Berlin. On the other hand, it has been widely speculated in dispatches that many Western officials want more de facto recognition of the East German Regime and as an evidence of this has been cited the renewal of the trade agreement that has just been signed this week. Can you clarify that situation a little bit?

A. I doubt if I can clarify it very much. There have been, as you point out, dealings on a de facto basis, particularly on an economic basis, and in terms of transit back and forth between the Western Sectors of Berlin and the Federal Republic of Germany. There has been an appreciable degree of de facto dealing with the GDR, and there is this trade agreement, whereby the Federal Republic gets particularly brown coal and things of that sort from the eastern part of Germany in exchange for certain manufactured goods. As to any differences within the Federal Republic about that, I am not in a position to throw light upon it. I am not aware of any differences which are of sufficient magnitude so that they have come to my attention.

[. . .]

Q. Mr. Secretary, you seem to draw a limit beyond which we would not go in dealing with the East Germans even as agents of the Soviet Union. Could I ask whether we would refuse, for example, to accept an East German demand that special credentials would be required from the East German Foreign Office in order to allow the traffic to continue?

A. I think it would be unwise for me to try to give categorical answers to very particular illustrations, because, obviously, this is a situation to be dealt with upon a tripartite or quadripartite basis.

I think I had better just stand on the proposition that in my opinion it is the combined judgment of all four of us that nothing should be done which would seem to give the GDR an authority and responsibility to deal with the matters as to which the Soviet Union has explicitly assumed an obligation to us and a responsibility to us.

Q. Mr. Secretary, the Mayor of West Berlin said today that this crisis might provide an opportunity for a new discussion with the Soviets on German and European security questions. Sir, do you see any possibility of renewing that discussion in view of the past deadlock, and are there any new thoughts here on tying the Russian idea of negotiating a peace treaty with German unification?

A. I would hardly think that the present mood of the Soviet Union makes this a propitious time for such a negotiation. Actually, of course, we would in these matters be largely guided by the views of the Federal Republic of Germany, which is primarily concerned, and which has a government with which we have the closest relations, and in which we have the greatest confidence. Their views in these matters would carry weight with us. I have had no intimation of this kind from the Government of the Federal Republic.

[. . .]

Q. Mr. Secretary, supposing that the question of a blockade did not come up but the East Germans insisted upon being dealt with as an independent nation rather than as agents of the Soviet Union, would we still insist upon using the three routes?

A. I really think that I have clarified our position on these matters as far as it is useful for me to try to do it at this time, bearing in mind this is a tripartite or quadripartite matter.

While I can state and have stated the common principles that are held and upon which we stand, I don't think it's wise for me to try, just on behalf of one of the four countries involved, to be more particular.

Q. Can I ask the question, Mr. Secretary, have we ruled out the possibility of using force to back up our rights to unimpeded access to Berlin should the East Germans seek to stop us?

A. We have not ruled out any of our rights at all. All I have said is that nothing that was said, which Khrushchev or anybody else in recent weeks has said, suggests that there is now any purpose on the part of either the Soviet Union or the GDR to impede or obstruct our access by the various media that are available to us to and from Berlin.

Therefore, it seems to me that the question as to whether if they did it we would use force is an academic proposition because, as I say, nothing has happened to indicate that there is any present intention on their part to do that.

Source: Remarks at News Conference by Secretary of State Dulles, on Berlin (November 26, 1958); reprinted in *Documents on Germany, 1944-1959: Background Documents on Germany, 1944-1959, and a Chronology of Political Developments affecting Berlin, 1945-1956*. Washington, DC: General Printing Office, 1959, pp. 312-17.