

Khrushchev's Berlin ultimatum to the Western powers in November 1958 led to the long Berlin crisis of 1958-63 and to one of the most dangerous crises of the Cold War, surpassed only by the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. Although the Berlin crisis continued after the building of the Berlin Wall in August 1961, the most dangerous phase of the crisis had been largely overcome by the end of 1961, once the short but chilling confrontation between Soviet and American tanks at Checkpoint Charlie had been resolved. This latest book by Rolf Steininger, one of the foremost contemporary historians in the German-speaking world, is a detailed study of the Berlin crisis, based on a thorough and comprehensive analysis of the available primary sources in Germany, Britain and the US. The book therefore supersedes all previous accounts of the Berlin crisis and the building of the Wall. Steininger is able to add to or even change the traditional interpretation of almost all aspects of the Berlin crisis. His examination of the 1959 Geneva foreign ministers' conferences and the abortive Paris summit conference in May 1960 is most interesting, while his analyses of Khrushchev's motives for provoking the Berlin crisis with his November ultimatum, of Soviet-East German relations, and of the complex relationships within the Western alliance are particularly valuable.

Steininger argues that it was not only the flight of an increasing number of East Germans from the GDR to West Berlin that worried Khrushchev and East German leader Ulbricht. The Soviets were above all concerned that the West Germans might soon be in possession of atomic bombs or be allowed to participate in NATO's nuclear decision-making. It also becomes clear that Ulbricht was not merely a passive receiver of instructions from Moscow, but did his best actively to push Khrushchev into the erection of the Wall. Steininger also focuses on the deep crisis within the Western alliance, which was made worse by British Prime Minister Macmillan's journey to Moscow to attempt, as he saw it, to prevent a third world war and to win the forthcoming general election in Britain. It becomes clear that throughout almost the entire Berlin crisis Macmillan's attempts at appeasing Khrushchev were much resented by Washington, Bonn and Paris and led to British isolation within the Western camp. De Gaulle and Adenauer were antagonized enough to refuse to support Macmillan's EC membership application a few years later.

Not least, Steininger's analysis of the shifting Western policy towards the German question deserves attention. While the Eisenhower administration was already showing increasingly less understanding in the late 1950s for Adenauer's inflexible insistence on non-recognition of the GDR and the West's traditional 'policy of strength' towards the Eastern bloc, the new president Kennedy changed Western policy in this regard. Henceforth the West would be much less influenced by protestations from Bonn and embark on a more flexible policy of *rapprochement* with the Soviet Union. Washington clearly expected that Bonn would recognize the GDR in due course. Moreover, it remained no secret that Kennedy, and

indeed Macmillan, were privately relieved about the building of the Wall which was soon seen as a stabilizing factor in both East and West. However, Steininger, like historians before him, has found no firm evidence that the West had been informed by Moscow that the Berlin Wall would be built.

Overall, Steininger has written an important and valuable book that sheds much new light on the Berlin crisis and the building of the Berlin Wall. It will remain the standard work on this topic for a long time to come.

Klaus Larres, Queen's University of Belfast, UK, in: *International Affairs*, Vol. 77, No 4, October 2001, pp. 1002 – 1003.