

Tensions ran high at Checkpoint Charlie in 1961 as Easterners fled to West, Berlin Wall went up

By Dave Melancon

U.S. Army Europe Public Affairs Office

HEIDELBERG, Germany -- At a traffic intersection in downtown Berlin almost 50 years ago this week, tensions between the United States and the former Soviet Union nearly escalated to the point of war.



The year 1961 began with a series of confrontations between the U.S. and USSR.

The U.S. severed diplomatic relations with Cuba Jan. 3. In April, about 1,200 U.S.-sponsored anti-Castro exiles invaded Cuba at the Bay of Pigs. At the same time, the Soviets were considering signing a separate treaty to recognize East Germany as a sovereign state.

In June, President John F. Kennedy met with Soviet Premier Nikita S. Khrushchev in Vienna. The meeting failed and tensions in Europe and the rest of the world continued to rise.

There were about 2,000 U.S. military advisers in South Vietnam at the time.

East Germany, calling itself the German Democratic Republic (Deutsche Demokratischen Republik or DDR), erected the Berlin Wall between East and West Berlin to halt flood of refugees Aug. 13.

At the beginning of 1961, it was still possible to travel freely to West Berlin on the “U-Bahn” (subway) and “S-Bahn” (elevated) train systems, said Bruce Siemon, U.S. Army Europe’s chief historian. Although it was illegal to leave the DDR without permission, young people, students, professionals, mid-level managers and executives, white-collar and skilled factory workers poured over the border to the west, draining the east of the talent needed to rebuild after World War II.

Siemon, a former USAREUR enlisted Soldier who has been a Department of the Army civilian employee since 1955, said he remembers many of the events taking place in Europe in 1961.

“West Berlin was the gateway to freedom,” the historian said. “It was still possible for an East German to go to East Berlin and hop on the subway and ride into West Berlin.”

According to U.S. Army records, 10,000 East Germans fled to West Berlin in January, another 34,000 left in July, and 36,000 more during the first of half August. USAREUR refugee statistics show a flow of about 3,000 easterners escaping to the west each week in May.



U.S. ARMY PHOTO

Soldiers from the U.S. Army Berlin Command face off against police from the former East Germany during one of several standoffs at Checkpoint Charlie in 1961. On several occasions that year, a U.S. quick reaction force of tanks and infantry Soldiers stood watch as armed military policemen escorted U.S. personnel across the border into East Berlin.

Siemon said he remembered attending an early August meeting with members of the USAREUR intelligence section to discuss the East German exodus. He recalls one analyst joking, “What are they going to do? Build a fence?”

In fact, two months earlier, Walter Ulbricht, General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany and Chairman of the Council of State of the German Democratic Republic from 1960–1973, tried to dispel rumors that East Germany was planning to build a barrier.

“There are people in West Germany who wish that we mobilize the building workers of the capital of the GDR, in order to put a wall up,” the chairman said, responding to a reporter’s question during June 15, 1961 press conference. “I do not know that such an intention exists, since the building workers in the capital concern themselves mainly with house building, and its workers are fully used. Nobody has the intention of establishing a wall.”

But on Saturday night, Aug. 12, the light-hearted prophecy made by Siemon's colleague just days earlier became a fact that would stand for nearly 28 years.

At first, the Berlin Wall was just a fence separating East and West Berlin. Over time, all of West Berlin would be cut off from East Germany. The subway lines were severed, the city divided. The border crossings were sealed. The wall would grow in four generations -- from a simple fence to an 11-foot concrete wall bristling with motion detectors and infrared sensors backed up by minefields and anti-vehicle trenches.

Around the same time barbed wire fencing was reinforced along the East and West German border all the way from the Baltic Sea to the former Czechoslovak border -- almost 1,400 kilometers (870 miles).

“That was it. Everything was shut down,” Siemon said, as he scanned through records of the former Berlin Command. “In the first half of August 1961 there were 36,800 registered (East German) refugees. For the month of December it was a total of 744. Putting the wall up really did make a difference as far as they (the East German government) were concerned.”

“As the situation grew worse, the president (Kennedy) decided in September to increase American troops in Europe and to call up some Reserve personnel and units to strengthen the continental U.S. forces,” wrote Walter G. Hermes in the [U.S. Army Center of Military History's Extract from American Military History](#). “By October almost 120,000 reserve troops, including two National Guard divisions, had been added to the active Army, and the Regular troop strength had been increased by more than 80,000.”

In Europe, as an immediate reaction to the Berlin Wall, USAREUR sent an augmented battle group from the 18th Infantry Regiment on Aug. 20 to back up the 4,300 Soldiers already stationed in Berlin. The 1,500-man task force consisted of five infantry companies, a 105mm howitzer battery and heavy weapons, combat engineer, transportation, ordnance and headquarters companies.

The task force travelled by autobahn with its own vehicles. In anticipation of possible difficulties from the East Germans or Soviets, the task force was given detailed rules of engagement as it began to convoy to Berlin through East Germany. The unit was prepared to remove any roadblocks, defend itself and call for additional support which included the U.S. Air Force based in Europe.

“Their instructions could have easily brought us into a firefight,” Siemon said. Later, two U.S. Soldiers were detained on the same autobahn Aug. 21. U.S. military police patrols on the roadway were stepped up.

“There had been talk in the U.S. earlier on a possible (military) build-up because of the Bay of Pigs and Khrushchev's threat to Kennedy at the June meeting in Vienna, that the Soviet Union

would sign a peace treaty with East Germany,” Siemon said. “From 1953 to 1961 U.S. strength in Europe had remained relatively stable. In June 1961 there were about 225,700 Soldiers serving in five divisions, three armored cavalry regiments and other support units assigned to USAREUR. In July the Joint Chiefs of Staff began to consider plans to increase that force to 12 divisions and four ACRs,” Siemon said.

Instead, in August the Secretary of Defense announced a plan to augment the Army in Europe on a much smaller scale -- some 3,000 personnel to mechanize the three infantry divisions, 18,000 to bring under-strength units up to standard and about 19,000 in combat support and service support units.

“This strengthening of the command was going on in parallel to the events in Berlin, and not directly as a result of the events in Berlin,” Siemon said.

“People were nervous and very concerned,” the historian continued. “In Germany, particularly in Berlin, things were happening -- unpleasant things like the famous confrontation at Checkpoint Charlie, a bigger event than we sometimes realize.”

In August, the East Germans, “with Soviet concurrence,” started to harass U.S. and allied personnel as they crossed the boundary between East and West Berlin despite a post-World War II agreement which stipulated free passage between the allied and Soviet sectors of the city, Siemon said. Under the agreement, U.S. personnel did not show IDs or pass documents to the East German police, because the Western Allies only dealt with the Soviets, in accordance with the post-World War II agreements that divided Berlin into sectors.

On Sept. 19 Kennedy dispatched retired Gen. Lucius D. Clay, former military governor of the U.S. Zone and known as the “father of the Berlin airlift,” to Berlin as an observer and a symbol



U.S. ARMY PHOTO

A U.S. tank crew stands guard at Checkpoint Charlie in West Berlin in 1961 during one of several standoffs between U.S. personnel and East German police that year. The sign in the upper right of the photo bears the famous remark made by Walter Ulbricht, General Secretary of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany on June 15, 1961: "Niemand hat die Absicht, eine Mauer zu errichten" -- "Nobody has any intention of building a wall. Two months later construction on the Berlin Wall began

of U.S. support. Direct communications between the White House and Clay were established, bypassing the U.S. European Command.

Clay's role was a critical one -- at least from the perspective of the West Berliners. They believed he was the one who had preserved the city's independence with the 1948 Berlin Airlift, and in 1961 his presence in Berlin was considered a statement of U.S. resolve to see this crisis to a successful conclusion as well, Siemon said.

Occasional harassment of U.S. personnel continued through September.

On Oct. 13, the Friederichsstrasse crossing point -- Checkpoint Charlie -- was closed," Siemon said. "So we rolled up a small team of tanks and armored personnel carriers and two rifle squads."

However, a probe of military vehicles was able to enter East Berlin at approximately 3 p.m., so the tank-infantry task force stood down and returned to garrison.

A U.S. State Department official was denied entry into the east at the checkpoint Oct. 22. Once again the tanks and infantry returned and armed military police officers escorted the official to the other side.

A similar incident occurred Oct. 24, leading to the formation of a quick reaction force that consisting of three teams: Team A with five M48 tanks -- three equipped with bulldozer blades -- plus two mechanized infantry squads and an engineer team; Team B with one tank platoon; and Team C with one infantry company and a tank platoon.

For a planned test of access rights, on Oct. 25 Teams A and B moved into position at the Tempelhof airfield near Checkpoint Charlie. Team A then moved to a spot close to the checkpoint, and at 6:30 a.m. a USAREUR-plated privately owned vehicle was allowed through without incident.

An hour later a second private vehicle was denied access by East German police. The U. S. officially protested to the Soviets. At 10:10 armed MPs escorted the vehicle through.

Teams A and B returned to the checkpoint at about 3 p.m. for another POV probe. East German police stopped the vehicle. Again MPs provided an armed escort to the east. Afterward, the QRF returned to the airfield for the night.

"These games continued to go on," Siemon said, "but the next day, things took a serious turn."

The tank confrontation of Oct. 27 made the front pages of newspapers around the world. The QRF deployed to the Checkpoint Charlie area for another probe, and at 4:30 p.m., armed MPs escorted another private vehicle to the east and the QRF withdrew.

A short time later 10 Soviet tanks rumbled up to the checkpoint's east side.

The U.S. QRF raced back to the site at 5 p.m. "and that's when the famous confrontation occurred, with both sides staring each other down with the tanks facing each other across the intersection," Siemon said.

At about 7 p.m., the tensions subsided and "everybody backed off a piece, but stayed in the neighborhood," he said.

These confrontations continued for the rest of 1961 while the East Germans built the wall.

"That was what it was all about from our perspective: insisting upon our guaranteed rights to which the Soviets had agreed," Siemon said. The Soviets said the Berlin situation was an East German issue, he added.

Berlin Command was reflagged as the U.S. Army Berlin, Dec. 1, 1961. A major general was assigned as its commanding general and as the U.S. commander for the city. U.S. Army Garrison, Berlin was redesignated the Berlin Brigade, the new command's combat element.

Tensions in Berlin slowly calmed over time as the East Germans completed sealing the borders.

"They built their dam and the flood of important contributing members of their society that they needed for their economic survival had been stopped," Siemon said. "But things remained tense."



U.S. ARMY PHOTO

Soldiers from the U.S. Army Berlin Command face off against police from the former East Germany during one of several standoffs at Checkpoint Charlie in 1961. On several occasions that year, a U.S. quick reaction force of tanks and infantry Soldiers stood watch as armed military policemen escorted U.S. personnel across the border into East Berlin.

The U.S. continued to increase its forces. In June 1962 USAREUR forces numbered 277,341 Soldiers, the most ever assigned to the command.

In an effort to avoid similar confrontations, the U.S. began to upgrade West Berlin's police capacity, making any future standoffs a civilian police-on-police matter starting in September. The buildup included the "loan" of 6,800 M-1 rifles and 175 rifle grenade launchers to help the West German police to defend the borders of West Berlin.

In accordance with postwar agreements, no German Soldiers were permitted to serve in Berlin or on the border between the Germanys, Siemon said.

In September, the Joint Chiefs of Staff directed USEUCOM to draft plans for reopening Berlin "if necessary," with or without allied support, Siemon said.

The confrontation at Checkpoint Charlie was one of the most combustible flashpoints during the Cold War, he said, a moment when U.S. and allied resolve not to back down showed the German people and our allies that America was going to stand with its partners against the Soviet Union.

"When push came to shove during those confrontations at Checkpoint Charlie, they (the Soviets) did back down. It did not come down to a firefight. We did not have a tank battle in the middle of downtown Berlin."

More information on the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall can be found by visiting the U.S. Army Europe home page at www.hqusareur.army.mil and clicking the "[Freedom Without Walls](#)" link.



2009: THE YEAR OF THE NCO

About us: The U.S. Army in Europe, with NATO and other coalition partners from throughout its 51-country area of responsibility, trains for, conducts, and supports contingency operations. Headquartered in Heidelberg, Germany, USAREUR has forces throughout Germany as well as in Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, Bulgaria, and Romania, and in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Visit the U.S. Army Europe home page at: www.hqusareur.army.mil

**Additional U.S. Army Europe images are available online at:
<http://www.flickr.com/groups/usarmyeurope>**