

KEY TOPIC 2

Cold War crises, 1958–70

SOURCE 1



A photograph of US President Kennedy speaking in Berlin in 1963.

By the later 1950s, the pattern of the Cold War was set. The superpowers were going to disagree on almost every major issue. Each side would praise their own system through obvious propaganda and their media, but also through art, films and literature. Each side would prove the superiority of its system through achievements in sport, science or technology. They would also spend billions on weapons to arm themselves and their allies.

Not surprisingly, this approach by each side resulted in many crises. In this section, you will look at three examples.

In 2.1, you will investigate why the superpowers clashed once again over Berlin in 1961, and how they managed to prevent this clash turning into a full-scale conflict. You will analyse the consequences of the Berlin Crisis for relations between the superpowers.

In 2.2, you will examine the most dangerous superpower crisis of all, the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. You will look at why the world came so close to nuclear war and how they managed to avoid war. You will analyse the consequences of this crisis including how, in the longer term, it probably made the world a safer place.

In 2.3, you will turn back to Europe and look at the Czechoslovakia Crisis, also known as the **Prague Spring**, of 1968. You will see how Soviet control was threatened and how the USSR and the rest of the Warsaw Pact leaders responded. You will evaluate the importance of the Prague Spring for Soviet control of Eastern Europe.

SUMMARY OF SPECIFICATION CONTENT

Increased tension between East and West

- ✓ The refugee problem in Berlin, Khrushchev's Berlin ultimatum (1958), and the summit meetings of 1959–61.
- ✓ Soviet relations with Cuba, the Cuban Revolution and the refusal of the USA to recognise Castro's government. The significance of the Bay of Pigs incident.
- ✓ Opposition in Czechoslovakia to Soviet control: the Prague Spring.

Cold War crises

- ✓ The construction of the Berlin Wall, 1961.
- ✓ The events of the Cuban Missile Crisis.
- ✓ The Brezhnev Doctrine and the re-establishment of Soviet control in Czechoslovakia.

Reaction to crisis

- ✓ Impact of the construction of the Berlin Wall on US–Soviet relations. Kennedy's visit to West Berlin in 1963.
- ✓ The consequences of the Cuban Missile Crisis, including the 'hotline'; attempts at arms control; the Limited Test Ban Treaty 1963; the Outer Space Treaty 1967; and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty 1968.
- ✓ International reaction to Soviet measures in Czechoslovakia.

FOCUS

You have already seen on page 20 how Berlin was an important flashpoint in the early years of the Cold War. Ten years after the Berlin Blockade, tension began to rise again between the superpowers over Berlin. A new crisis developed which seemed to be even more dangerous than the first one. You will investigate the consequences of these events for Berlin and for superpower relations.

SOURCE 2



Soviet tanks in Berlin in June 1953. Almost 30,000 troops were used to crush the protest and around 125 protesters were killed.

2.1 The Berlin Crisis, 1961

The refugee problem in Berlin

Repression in East Germany

In the 1950s, East Germany was possibly the most repressive of all the Soviet satellite states in Eastern Europe. This was partly because there was a history of resistance to Soviet rule. When Stalin died in 1953, there was a huge popular uprising. Around 400,000 East Germans took to the streets to protest against the communist government. The protest was crushed by troops and tanks (see Source 2).

In response, the East German Government expanded its secret police, called the Stasi. The Stasi operated a vast network of informers. They had the power to arrest anyone who was thought to be a threat to the communist government. By the late 1950s, one-third of East Germany's prison population were political prisoners.

The Stasi's own secret reports stated that many East Germans felt desperate about life in East Germany and hopeless about ever having a better future.

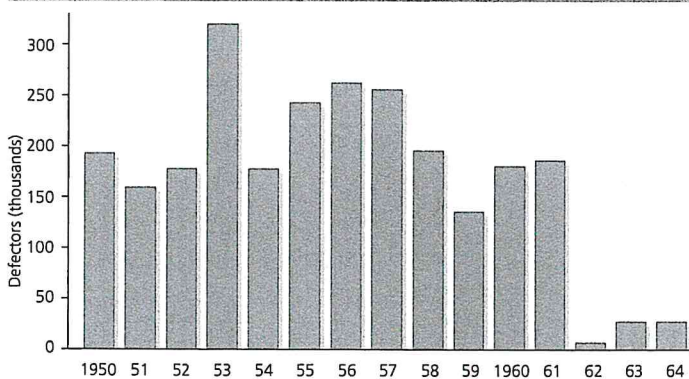
Defection to the West

Berlin was one of the few places where people could travel freely between the communist world and the West.

The result was that many East Germans who were dissatisfied with their lives in East Germany did the obvious thing. They **defected**. They packed up their possessions, crossed into West Berlin and never came back (see Figure 1).

They did this for many reasons.

FIGURE 1



Numbers of people crossing from East to West Germany, 1950-64.

- They resented the lack of freedom. They lived in fear of the Stasi.
- Another complaint was corruption. Many government officials demanded bribes or made sure their friends and families got the best jobs and houses.
- The greatest cause of dissatisfaction was the low standard of living. East Germans could see that in West Berlin, the shops were full of goods and its citizens enjoyed a better quality of life.

By 1958, 3 million East Germans had left for a new life in the West. That's around one-sixth of the population.

RETRIEVAL PRACTICE

- 1 What was unusual about Berlin in the 1950s?
- 2 Why were people leaving East Germany?
- 3 Why did Khrushchev find the situation unacceptable?
- 4 What role did Ulbricht play?

Khrushchev's response

By the later 1950s, the refugee problem was becoming a concern for the Soviet leader Khrushchev.

- *It was humiliating* to see so many people fleeing communism because they preferred to live in the capitalist West. Khrushchev described Berlin as being like a fishbone stuck in his throat. Of course, the USA made the most of this situation in their propaganda.
- *It weakened East Germany.* The defectors tended to be young, skilled and educated workers. Losing these well-qualified people – often called a 'Brain Drain' – meant there was a lack of skilled workers in East German industry and education. This was very damaging to East Germany's economy.
- *It was a security risk.* In addition, the open border posed a problem for the reverse reason – the East German leader Walter Ulbricht warned Khrushchev that the open border with West Berlin allowed US agents to get in to East Berlin to spy on Eastern Europe. Ulbricht probably exaggerated how much spying was going on, but it was definitely happening.

RETRIEVAL PRACTICE

- 5 What was the Berlin ultimatum?
- 6 How did the West react?
- 7 What role did Adenauer and Ulbricht play?

Khrushchev's Berlin ultimatum, 1958

On 27 November 1958, Khrushchev gave an ultimatum over Berlin. He demanded that the Western powers should leave West Berlin within six months and that Berlin would become an independent free city.

People in the West reacted furiously to Khrushchev's ultimatum. They claimed this was another act of Soviet aggression and an attempt to spread communism. The tension rose.

East German leader Ulbricht supported Khrushchev's hard line. At the same time, the Chancellor of West Germany, Konrad Adenauer, wanted the Americans to refuse all of Khrushchev's demands. Adenauer did not think East Germany should even exist and thought the whole of Germany should be reunited.

FOCUS TASK

What were the consequences of the refugee problem in Berlin?

This table lists some consequences of the refugee problem in Berlin. For each one, explain who was affected by this, explain how big the impact was, and explain how it made superpower relations better or worse.

Consequence	Explanation
Communist leaders felt humiliated	They hated seeing people leaving communist East Germany to go to the rival capitalist system in the West
East Germany was losing some of its most skilled workers	
Khrushchev issued his ultimatum for the Western powers to leave Berlin	

RETRIEVAL PRACTICE

1 Summarise each summit.

Make sure you list

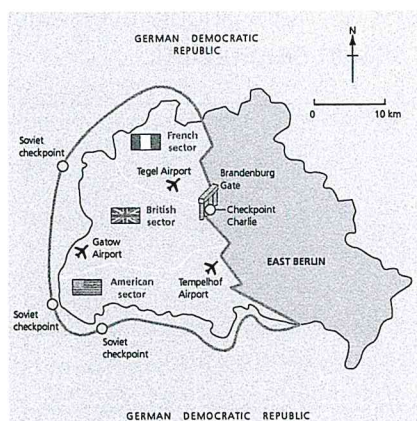
- place
- date
- agreements or disagreements.

Summit meetings, 1959–61

Remember that at this point both sides had troops in Berlin and both sides had nuclear missiles aimed at each other. But remember too that although the tensions were high, both sides were anxious to avoid war. On the other hand, they were very keen not to seem weak by giving in to the other side. They met several times to try to work out a solution to the problem of Berlin.

Geneva, May 1959	US and Soviet officials met in Geneva in Switzerland. They did not reach any agreement, but Eisenhower invited Khrushchev to visit the USA.
Camp David, September 1959	Khrushchev visited the USA. He met some ordinary Americans, as well as political leaders, and seemed to be more friendly towards the Americans than they had been used to from earlier leaders.
	He met with Eisenhower at the President's country retreat, Camp David. They could not reach an agreement, but they did agree to a third meeting, this time in Paris in May 1960.
Paris, May 1960	Plans were all in place for this summit, but were wrecked when Soviet forces shot down an American spy plane and captured its pilot. Khrushchev demanded an apology from the US for spying, but Eisenhower refused.
Vienna, June 1961	There was a presidential election in the USA in 1960. The new President was John F. Kennedy. He and Khrushchev met in Vienna in July 1961.
	Khrushchev thought that Kennedy was inexperienced and so he took a very aggressive approach and demanded that Kennedy should accept the Berlin ultimatum. Kennedy refused. The relationship between the USA and USSR was very strained. Khrushchev was also beginning to lose patience with the situation in Berlin.

FIGURE 2



The Berlin Wall 1961.

The construction of the Berlin Wall

The tensions over Berlin had an unexpected and very unwelcome effect for Khrushchev. The flow of refugees increased still further. On one day in early August 1961, 40,000 East Germans left for the West.

East German communist leader Ulbricht urged Khrushchev to act, so on 13 August 1961, East German troops closed the border between East and West Berlin. Soviet workmen arrived at the edge of the Soviet sector. They unloaded wood and barbed wire. Metre by metre, they built a wood and wire barricade all along the border.

East German border guards had orders to shoot anyone who tried to cross without a permit. Within a week, buildings that lay on the Soviet side of the border had their windows bricked up. Within a month, the barbed wire fence was being replaced by a brick

and concrete wall. In a very short time, the wall had high watch towers and machine-gun posts with armed guards, dogs and even minefields.

Impact of the Berlin Wall

In East Berlin, the initial reaction was a scramble to get to the West. There were many attempts to cross into the West using tunnels, by swimming across the river or canals or just making a run for it. Most attempts ended in failure and even death, like Peter Fechter. Peter was a young East German who tried to escape from East Berlin to West Berlin in 1962. He was shot by East German border guards. He lay in pain and bled to death in plain view, before his body was collected (see Source 3). His death became a symbol of how the great forces of the Cold War could destroy the lives of ordinary people. It is estimated that around 130 people were killed trying to cross the wall between 1961 and 1989.

Families were divided by the wall. Photos such as Source 4 appeared in the newspapers of West Berlin.

The wall worried West Berliners too. It looked like the Soviet Union was squaring up for a fight. Khrushchev had already warned the Americans to get out of Berlin or face a war. This looked like one step towards it. West Berliners held a huge rally on 17 August calling on the American President, John F. Kennedy, to keep troops in Berlin and not give in to Soviet bullying.

SOURCE 3



A photograph showing East German border guards carrying the body of Peter Fechter away from the Berlin Wall.

RETRIEVAL PRACTICE

- 2 Why did the number of refugees increase in August 1961?
- 3 How did Khrushchev react?
- 4 What was Ulbricht's role?
- 5 What were the different stages of the creation of the wall?
- 6 How did the wall affect people in Berlin?

SOURCE ANALYSIS

What do you think was the main purpose of the photographer in taking and publishing Source 4? Explain your answer.

SOURCE 4



A photograph from 26 August 1961. The original caption in the western media was 'Two mothers can only wave to their children and grandchildren in the Soviet sector of Berlin from across the Berlin wall'. We do not know for sure whether the photograph actually shows mothers separated from their children.

SOURCE 5

Instructions were given to our tank commander that he was to roll up and confront the Soviet tank, which was at the identical distance across from Checkpoint Charlie. The tension escalated very rapidly for the one reason that this was Americans confronting Russians. It wasn't East Germans. There was live ammunition in both tanks of the Russians and the Americans. It was an unexpected, sudden confrontation that in my opinion was the closest that the Russians and the Allies came to going to war in the entire Cold War period.

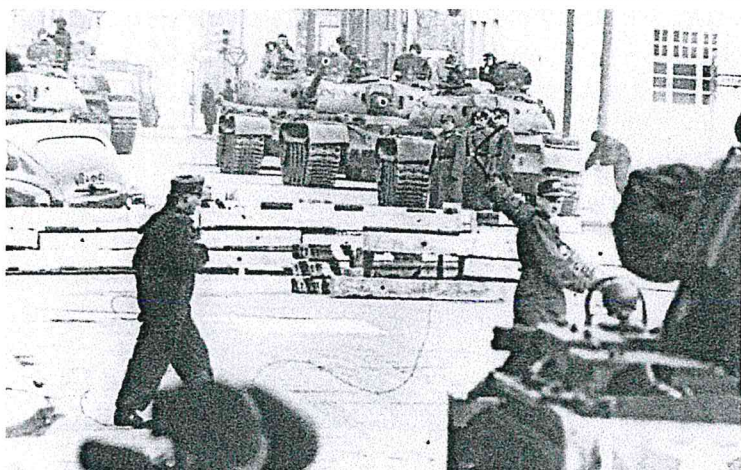
Colonel Jim Atwood, who was part of the US military in Berlin in 1961.

The impact of the Berlin Wall on superpower relations

The Berlin Crisis had important consequences for superpower relations.

A real fear of war

Kennedy criticised the building of the wall. He sent extra troops to Berlin and promised he would not abandon the city. In response, the Soviets tightened their control. At first, they allowed US troops and officials to cross the wall, as this had been agreed at Potsdam. But on 27 October, Soviet tanks pulled up to Checkpoint Charlie and refused to allow any further access to the East. All day, US and Soviet tanks, fully armed, faced each other in a tense stand-off. Then, after 18 hours, one by one, slowly the tanks pulled back.

SOURCE 6

A photograph from the American side of Checkpoint Charlie showing the confrontation with Soviet tanks on 27 October 1961.

SOURCE ANALYSIS

Explain why Sources 5 and 6 are more useful together than they are separately.

A willingness to back off

It seemed that neither side was going to back down in their demands and what they said, but they would back off and not go to war over Berlin. In this sense, Berlin was important – it showed that the superpowers could stand up to each other and criticise each other very forcefully but without going to war.

RETRIEVAL PRACTICE

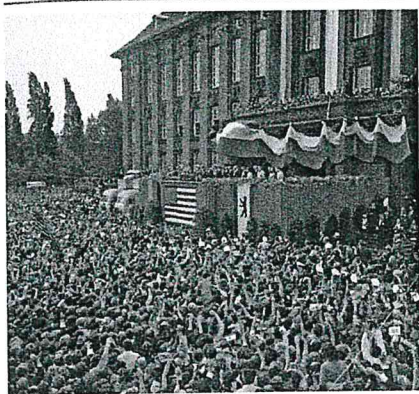
- 1 How did Kennedy respond to the building of the Berlin Wall?
- 2 Did this stop the Soviets?
- 3 How did the Soviets increase their control on 27 October?
- 4 How did the US react?
- 5 We know with hindsight that a war was unlikely but did it feel that way at the time?

Positives for Kennedy

For Kennedy, the Berlin Crisis brought several positives.

- Kennedy visited Berlin in 1963. He was given a tremendous welcome. In a famous speech delivered in front of the wall he said, 'Freedom has many difficulties and democracy is not perfect, but we have never had to put a wall up to keep our people in, to prevent them from leaving us.' It was a memorable speech and it played well in the media in the West.
- Kennedy established a reputation as a tough and intelligent statesman, but also a realist. His view on Berlin was that, 'It's not a very nice solution, but a wall is a hell of a lot better than a war.'

SOURCE 7



A photograph of US President Kennedy speaking in Berlin in 1963.

SOURCE ANALYSIS

Would you say Source 7 is more useful as evidence about:

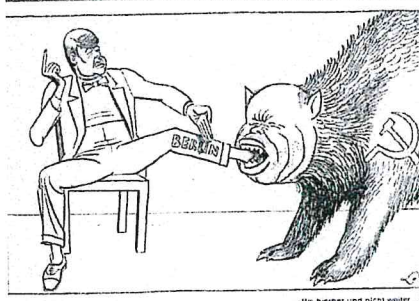
- Kennedy's speech in Berlin in 1963
- The reaction to Kennedy's speech
- The impact of the speech on Kennedy's reputation?

Explain your answer.

Positives for Khrushchev

- First and foremost, Khrushchev stopped the flow of refugees from the East. This brought an end to a humiliating situation which undermined communism and Khrushchev's authority.
- Khrushchev had also shown that he was tough by demonstrating that Kennedy could not stop him building the wall and by forcing the USA to accept that its troops and diplomats could no longer travel through East Berlin.
- Finally, Khrushchev earned the gratitude and strong support of the East German communist leader, Walter Ulbricht, which increased Khrushchev's prestige and authority within the Warsaw Pact.

SOURCE 8



A cartoon by the German artist Ernst Lang, August 1961. Kennedy is saying 'This much and no further.'

SOURCE ANALYSIS

- 1 Source 8 was drawn by a German cartoonist. Do you think he was East German or West German?
- 2 Does the cartoon suggest that either Kennedy or Khrushchev triumphed in 1961? Explain your answer.
- 3 Is the cartoon critical or supportive of either Kennedy or Khrushchev? Remember the cartoonist might be using sarcasm.

RETRIEVAL PRACTICE

- 6 What did Kennedy gain from the Berlin Crisis of 1961?
- 7 What did Khrushchev gain from the crisis?
- 8 In what ways did the Berlin Crisis increase tensions between the superpowers?
- 9 In what ways did the crisis ease the tensions between them?

Berlin: A Cold War pressure valve

A final way in which the crisis was important was in the way it showed that the superpowers could strongly disagree yet not go to war. The USA and USSR had clashed bitterly during the summits of 1959–61 and tanks had faced each other in Berlin. But after the high tension of 1961, the superpowers did not clash seriously over Berlin again.

Berlin became a symbol of the Cold War, but was not the scene of another crisis or conflict.

Berlin also proved to be a useful place for the superpowers to have secret meetings or communications if they needed them. It was used as a place to exchange captured spies and other prisoners in secret. So in some ways the Berlin Wall Crisis had a positive consequence for superpower relations.