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Comments on the Preparation of the Steps of the Soviet Government Concerning a Change in the Status of West Berlin

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Summary:

East German ambassador to Moscow, Johannes Koenig summarized information he gleaned from various Soviet Foreign Ministry officials about the process leading up to Soviet Premier Nikita S. Khrushchev's speech of 10 November 1958 and notes of 27 November 1958, which launched the Berlin Crisis.

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On the preparation of these actions (the composition of Comrade Khrushchev's speech of 10 November and the notes of the Soviet government to the governments of the three Western powers, the GDR and the Bonn government), in which the [Soviet] MID [Ministerstvo Inostrannykh Del, Ministry of Foreign Affairs] and especially its Third European Department played a critical part. Already several days before Comrade Khrushchev's appearance on 10 November 1958 on the occasion of the Soviet-Polish friendship meeting, comrades from the MID let it drop on 6 November that Comrade Khrushchev's speech of 10 November would bring "something new" with regard to the German question. The Soviet comrades would not, however, hint a word about the substance of the "news."

On 10 November, a few hours before Comrade Khrushchev's appearance, I was still in the [Soviet] Foreign Ministry and had a conversation with Comrade [Ivan I.] Il'ichev, the head of the Third European Department. He also commented, when I turned the conversation to the insufficient coverage of the GDR election campaign [for the 16 November 1958 Volkskammer (parliament) and local government elections] by the Soviet press, that Comrade Khrushchev's speech would contain important statements with regard to the German question. He told me nothing about what it would deal with. It was, however, obvious that the comrades of the Third European Department were informed excellently about the contents of Comrade Khrushchev's speech.

After the speech was held and had called forth the well-known echo in Bonn and the capitals of the three Western powers,¹ the entire Third European Department of the MID was occupied exclusively with preparing the next steps. I think that I am not mistaken in the assumption that ideas about concrete steps developed gradually at first and perhaps were subject to certain changes.

We know from information from comrades of the Third European Department that the entire Department was occupied for days with studying all agreements, arrangements, protocols, etc., which were concluded or made between the occupying powers with regard to West Berlin since 1945 so as to prepare arguments for shattering assertions made by Bonn and the governments of the Western powers and so as to make from these [i.e., old agreements, etc.--H.H.] concrete proposals for the next steps for carrying out the measures announced in Comrade Khrushchev's speech.

The MID was essentially finished with this work on 19 November 1958.² According to information from Soviet comrades, the work on the comprehensive document was finished on this day and the document was submitted to the Council of Ministers for ratification. On this occasion, we learned that this document was supposed to comprise about 20 pages and was supposed to be presented to the three Western Powers, the GDR and West Germany soon. Thus, at this time we did not yet learn that there were 3 different documents.³

The Soviet comrades who gave us this news for "personal information" emphasized that they probably would not be telling us anything new, since "Berlin is informed and surely the same practice must exist with us as on the Soviet side, namely that the ambassador concerned absolutely must be informed about such issues regularly."

This comment: "You have of course already been informed by Berlin" was made to me a few other times so as to make clear that we should not expect official information on the part of the local [i.e., Moscow] MID.

In the conversation we conducted with the relevant Soviet comrades, it was said that a comprehensive argumentation was provided in the planned document for establishing the repeal of the agreements concerning Berlin (of September 1944, May 1945, and the Bolz-Zorin⁴ exchange of letters [of September 1955]) and that these functions would be transferred to the competence of the GDR. With this it was already mentioned that it is planned to hold official negotiations with the GDR on this. At the same time a hint was made that the Soviet Union would probably not be averse if it should prove to be expedient and necessary also to speak with the Western powers about this issue.

In the negotiations with the GDR, the issue of the transfer or the taking over of the relevant functions will be discussed. The key question in this is when, i.e., at which point in time and how the whole thing should be carried out. Our leading comrades, with whom consultations have taken place, also expressed the view that in this one must not place too much haste on the day, but must go forward gradually, step by step.⁵

In this conversation the Soviet comrade in question thought [very realistically, as it turned out--H.H.] that the Berlin issue would remain at the center of attention for at least one year if not even longer. On this issue hard conflicts with the Western powers will arise.⁶

To my comment: "The Western powers will not want to conduct a war for the sake of Berlin" followed the answer: "Our Presidium proceeds from the same assumption." My comment that ultimately the issue would come to a crisis for the West as a prestige issue and that therefore in my opinion everything must be done so as to facilitate retreat for the Western powers on this issue was acknowledged as correct.

In this connection it was noted by the Soviet comrade that the issue of great significance is what should happen with West Berlin after an eventual withdrawal of the Western troops. This issue plays a large role in the considerations of the Soviet comrades.

Thus, in this conversation, the issue of the transformation of West Berlin into a free city was not yet dealt with.

It was emphasized that in this connection public opinion is also of great significance. One cannot resolve this issue if one has not prepared the basis for this within the population. A correct argumentation vis-a-vis the population so as to win them over for the planned steps is thus of great importance.

In this connection, it was also mentioned that Comrade Khrushchev personally gave extraordinarily great attention to the preparation of the new steps regarding the Berlin question. He personally participated in the preparation of the documents. He submitted to the comrades of the Third European Department his thoughts on the entire problem on several type-written pages which he had personally dictated and asked the comrades to observe this point of view in the composition of the documents and the determination of particular measures.

Comrade Khrushchev personally received on 19 November for a discussion several responsible officials of the Third European Department of the MID who were occupied with the Berlin issue and spoke with them in great detail about the entire problem.

The first mention that the Soviet proposals would include the demilitarization and neutralization of West Berlin was made to me by Comrade Il'ichev on 22 November when I sought him out on another matter. He again emphasized that he wanted to

give me "exclusively for my personal information" several hints about the contents of the planned documents. In this connection he mentioned that it was planned to propose giving West Berlin the status of a free city.

Comrade Il'ichev emphasized on this occasion that the Soviet side was ready to negotiate with the three Western powers on the Berlin question, but only on the basis of the enforcement of the Potsdam Agreement in West Germany, [including] for example, demilitarization, denazification, decartellization, repeal of the prohibition of the KPD [Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands], etc.

Concerning further actions regarding Berlin, Comrade Il'ichev also emphasized that these would proceed step by step.

To my question as to whether the planned documents would be given to all nations which took place in the war against Germany, Comrade Il'ichev answered that they would be given only to the three Western powers as well as to Berlin and Bonn. To my question as to whether the delivery would occur in Moscow or Berlin and Bonn, Comrade Il'ichev answered, "probably in Berlin."

After the delivery of the documents, they will wait 2-3 weeks so as to digest the reaction of the other side and then take a new step.⁷

Regarding the negotiations with the GDR or the transfer to the GDR of the functions which are still being exercised by the Soviet side, this will also probably proceed gradually.

I asked Comrade Il'ichev again about the contents of the talks between [Soviet Ambassador to West Germany Andrei] Smirnov and [West German Chancellor Konrad] Adenauer. Comrade Il'ichev confirmed that Smirnov had sought this talk. He once again merely explained the point of view which was expressed in Comrade Khrushchev's speech of 10 November 1958. Regarding this, Adenauer responded that he could not understand Soviet foreign policy. Precisely now when the first signs of a detente were noticeable at the Geneva negotiations,⁸ the Soviet government would create new tension with its statement concerning Berlin.

An explanation of why Smirnov conducted this conversation at all in view of the fact that the Soviet government stands by the point of view that Berlin is a matter which does not concern West Germany but is a matter of the GDR was not given to me by Comrade Il'ichev.⁹

Since the publication of the document to the GDR, the 3 Western powers, and West Germany on 27 November 1958, we have not had another opportunity to speak with Soviet comrades about these questions.

From the above remarks, in my view one can without doubt draw the conclusion that the Soviet comrades already have firm views about the execution of the measures proposed in the documents mentioned.¹⁰ This applies especially in regard to the concrete steps concerning the transfer of the functions still exercised by the Soviet side in Berlin and on the transit routes between West Germany and Berlin.

The concrete steps and forms for the execution of the other measures in regard to West Berlin [presumably meaning the free-city proposal--H.H.] will probably not remain uninfluenced by the statements and responses by the Western powers and by developments within West Berlin itself.

As far as the entire problem is concerned, immediately after Comrade Khrushchev's

speech of 10 November 1958 I remembered the conversation which took place at the end of 1957 in Berlin on the occasion of the negotiations for the settlement of issues which were still open [in Soviet-East German relations--H.H.] and in which Deputy Foreign Minister Zorin and then-Ambassador Pushkin from the Soviet side and Deputy Ministers Comrade Winzer and Comrade Schwab as well as Ambassador Koenig took part.¹¹ As is known, Ambassador Pushkin already expressed the view then in the course of this free and open discussion that it is not impossible to resolve the Berlin question already before the resolution of the German question.¹²

Moscow, 4 December 1958 Koenig

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1. [Generally the Western powers declared that the Soviets did not have the right to change the situation in Berlin unilaterally and asserted that the Soviets were obliged to safeguard the communications routes between West Berlin and West Germany for the Western powers. At a news conference on 26 November 1958, however, U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles perhaps opened a window for Soviet strategy by adding that the United States might be prepared to treat East German border officials as agents of the Soviet Union, although not as representatives of a sovereign state of East Germany. "News Conference Remarks by Secretary of State Dulles Reasserting the 'Explicit Obligation' of the Soviet Union to Assure 'Normal Access to and Egress From Berlin,' November 26, 1958," U.S. State Department, ed., Documents on Germany, 1944-1985 (Washington, D.C.: Department of State Publication 9446), 546-52.--H.H.]

2. [According to another document I have seen, two days prior to this date, on November 17, Pervukhin "informed [Ulbricht] about the proposed measures of the Soviet government regarding the four-power status of Berlin." "Zapis' besedy s tovarishchem V. Ul'brikhtom 17.11.58g" ("Memorandum of Conversation with Comrade W. Ulbricht 17.11.58"), from the diary of M.G. Pervukhin on 24 November 1958, Tsentr Khraneniia Sovremennoi Dokumentatsii (TsKhSD) [the Center for the Preservation of Contemporary Documentation--the post-1952 Central Committee Archives], Rolik (microfilm reel) 8873, Fond 5, Opis 49, Delo (file) 77. Thus, either one of these dates is wrong, or Pervukhin was extremely confident that the "proposed measures" would be ratified by the Council of Ministers.--H.H.]

3. [It is not entirely clear what the three different documents were. This may refer to the somewhat different notes sent to the United States, Great Britain, and France, but there were also notes sent to both German governments, making five different documents.--H.H.]

4. [East German Foreign Minister Lothar Bolz and Soviet Foreign Minister V.A. Zorin appended to the "Treaty on Relations between the German Democratic Republic and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics" of 20 September 1955 an exchange of letters detailing rights of control over inter-German and inter-Berlin borders and the communications routes between Berlin and West Germany. See Ministerium fur Auswartige Angelegenheiten der DDR und Ministerium fur Auswartige Angelegenheiten der UdSSR, ed., Beziehungen DDR-UdSSR, Vol. 2 (Berlin: Staatsverlag der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, 1975), 996-8.--H.H.]

5. [See "Zapis' besedy s tovarishchem V. Ul'brikhtom 17.11.58g" ("Record of Meeting with Comrade W. Ulbricht on 17 November 1958"), from the diary of M.G. Pervukhin

on 24 November 1958, TsKhSD, Rolik 8873, Fond 5, Opis 49, Delo 77, in which Ulbricht told Soviet Ambassador Mikhail Pervukhin: "Regarding concrete steps towards implementing the Soviet government's proposals for transferring to GDR organs the control functions which have been carried out by Soviet organs in Berlin, . . . perhaps we should not hurry with this, since this would give us the opportunity to keep the adversary under pressure for a certain period of time." Ulbricht's justification for going slowly aside, this is a rare instance in which the East German leader was not pushing the Soviets to move faster on giving up their control functions in Berlin to the GDR.--H.H.]

6. [It may be that the Soviet official in question here had some reason to believe that Khrushchev's declared intention of transferring Soviet control functions in Berlin to the GDR was more of a threat to get the Western powers to the bargaining table than a serious intention. While it proved very useful as a threat, Khrushchev knew that carrying it out in practice would mean relinquishing some Soviet control over the situation in Berlin to the GDR. As the crisis progressed, Khrushchev came to the conclusion, no doubt based in large part on Ulbricht's obvious attempts to wrest control from him and further exacerbate the situation in Berlin, that he did not want to do this. See the argument made in Harrison, "Ulbricht and the Concrete 'Rose'," and idem., "The Dynamics of Soviet-East German Relations and the Berlin Crisis, 1958-1961," paper presented to the 35th Annual Convention of the International Studies Association, Washington, D.C., 28 March-1 April 1994.--H.H.]

7. [The next step was taken on 10 January 1959, when the Soviets submitted a draft German peace treaty accompanied by a note to the three Western powers and sent copies of these to all of the countries that had fought against Germany in World War II, as well as to both German states. For the text of the note to the United States and the draft treaty, see Documents on Germany, 585-607.--H.H.]

8. [The reference is to the disarmament negotiations which began in Geneva on 31 October 1958 between the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union. The negotiations ultimately resulted in a treaty on the partial banning of nuclear testing which was signed by the three powers in Moscow on 5 August 1963. On these negotiations, see Christer Jonsson, *Soviet Bargaining Behavior. The Nuclear Test Ban Case* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979).--H.H.]

9. [The East Germans were often frustrated at Soviet attempts to maintain or improve relations with the West Germans. The Soviets were always walking a fine diplomatic line of trying to maintain good relations with each part of Germany while not overly alienating the other part in the process. While Khrushchev's prime concern was the support, protection, and strengthening of the GDR, he also had economic, military, and political reasons for maintaining good relations with the FRG.--H.H.]

10. [Presumably, this refers to the Soviet intention to move forward slowly and cautiously with the transfer of some Soviet responsibilities in Berlin to the GDR.--H.H.]

11. [It is possible that Koenig is actually referring to a meeting that took place on 12 December 1956 (as opposed to 1957) in which several remaining "open issues" in Soviet-East German relations were discussed. See Koenig's account of the meeting, "Bericht über eine Unterredung mit stellvertr. Aussenminister, Gen. Sorin" ("Report on a Conversation with Deputy Foreign Ministry Comrade Zorin"), 14 December 1956, SAPMO-BArch, ZPA, NL 90/472.--H.H.]

12. [Pushkin was not the only leading Soviet or East German official who believed that the Berlin issue could (and perhaps should) be resolved before the resolution of the entire German question. The next Soviet Ambassador to East Germany after Pushkin, Mikhail Pervukhin, also believed this, as did Soviet counselor Oleg Selianinov and

Peter Florin, the head of the International Department of the SED Central Committee. See "O polozhenii v Zapadnom Berline" ("On the Situation in West Berlin), 24 February 1958, report written by two diplomats at the Soviet embassy in the GDR, O. Selianinov, counselor, and A. Kazenov, second secretary, TsKhSD, Rolik 8875, Fond 5, Opis 49, Delo 82; and "Zapis' besedy s zav. mezhdunarodnym otdelom TsK SEPG P. Florinom" ("Record of Conversation with the Head of the International Department of the SED CC P. Florin), 12 May 1958, from Selianinov's diary, 16 May 1958, TsKhSD, Rolik 8873, Fond 5, Opis 49, Delo 76. Both are cited in Harrison, "Ulbricht and the Concrete 'Rose,'" 5-6. Considering how this document concludes, it is ironic that as the crisis actually progressed, it was the East German leadership far more than the Soviet leadership that wanted to resolve the Berlin question separately from and before a general German settlement.--H.H.]