



**David G. Coleman, “Eisenhower and the Berlin Problem, 1953-1954”, *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 2, Issue 1 (Winter 2000): 3-34.**

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“The leaders of the United States,” Khrushchev told one of his advisors in September 1958,” are not such idiots [as] to fight over Berlin.” This remark, made on the eve of the ultimatum that touched off the Berlin crisis of 1958-1962, seemed perfectly logical. Yet, David Coleman suggests in this provocative article, Khrushchev may have underestimated the American willingness to risk general war over Berlin. [1]

Coleman emphasizes that to understand the U.S. reaction to the Berlin crisis of 1958-1962, it is necessary to begin in 1953. (In this respect, Coleman’s article complements Hope Harrison’s research on Soviet and East German policy which also traces the origins of the Berlin crisis to 1953.) [2] Coleman examines the Eisenhower administration’s policy on Berlin as articulated in National Security Council policy papers and discussions from 1953-1954. He argues that with Eisenhower’s approval of NSC 5404/1 “U.S. Policy on Berlin” in January 1954, “two fundamental decisions about the Berlin problem had already been made: The United States would stay in West Berlin even at the risk of general war, and it would use West Berlin as the ‘free world’s outpost’ against the Soviet bloc.”

These two decisions, Coleman argues, symbolized Eisenhower’s rejection of the “overly defensive” posture of the Truman administration with respect to Berlin in favor of a more confrontational approach. In particular, Eisenhower: (1) articulated a greater willingness to use military force to defend Western access rights in Berlin; and (2) stepped up the psychological warfare and covert operations in Eastern Europe using Berlin as a symbolic and operational hub to sow political instability behind the “iron curtain.”

Coleman’s analysis of the first decision is perhaps the most striking. Eisenhower inherited from Truman an NSC policy paper on Berlin specifying that “the Western powers should avoid the use of force unless and until necessity dictates.” But, according to Coleman, Eisenhower “saw a much lower threshold of what constituted ‘necessity’ than his predecessor.” In particular, Eisenhower ruled out the possibility of another airlift in the event of a second Berlin blockade. Although the airlift of 1948-1949 was widely regarded as a political and psychological victory for the West, Eisenhower believed that if the West acquiesced in a new blockade the blow to U.S. prestige would be crippling. According to Coleman, Eisenhower believed that “if the Soviet Union blockaded West Berlin again it would be tantamount to a declaration of war” and the United States would have to use military force to break the blockade. [3]

The picture Coleman paints of Eisenhower here is a far cry from the restrained, moderate portrait composed by the Eisenhower “revisionists.” The policy approved by Eisenhower in NSC 5404/1 contained strong and repeated recommendations that the United States react “vigorously,”

“quickly,” “forcefully,” and “promptly” to any new Berlin crisis. It also “spelled out a clear process of escalation” should the Soviets block access to Berlin: the United States would send an armed probe along the Autobahn to assess Soviet intentions. Simultaneously, Coleman explains: “Washington would initiate general mobilization for the dual purpose of persuading Moscow of the direness of the situation and of preparing, if necessary, for all-out war.” Because Berlin was itself militarily indefensible, the United States “would immediately invoke general war plans.”

This “detailed and escalatory contingency planning”, Coleman concedes, “was intended as a fall-back option, not as a rigid guide to action.” Perhaps for this reason, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles was curiously uninterested in the NSC debates over what the U.S. should do in the event of a second blockade. He believed it was highly unlikely that the Soviet Union would physically attempt to prevent U.S. forces from entering or leaving the city. (“There is not one chance in 1000 the Soviets will push it to the point of war,” he remarked.) Dulles’s jealous guardianship of State Department primacy in foreign affairs was such that he was rarely without strong opinions on questions impinging on his domain. [4]

His indifference therefore raises the question: precisely what was the significance of all this contingency planning? Coleman argues that it laid the foundation for Eisenhower’s response to Khrushchev’s 1958 ultimatum, but he does specify precisely *how*. Indeed, when the 1958 crisis finally came around, Eisenhower appeared to have met the challenge without the “rapid and decisive escalation of [the] crisis” advised by the NSC policy documents. Coleman’s analysis would have been strengthened had he shown more clearly how these decisions of 1953-1954 set the stage for the Berlin crises of 1958 to 1962.

Coleman’s stress on the psychological and symbolic importance of Berlin to the Eisenhower administration, however, adds a welcome layer of complexity to his analysis. Eisenhower, he reveals, wanted “to make positive use of the American commitment to Berlin by maximizing the inherent propaganda benefits of the situation.” Eisenhower and Dulles “played up” the symbolism of Berlin as part of their war for hearts and minds: they cultivated the symbol of Berlin as a “key element of the wider effort to undermine Communist control in Eastern Europe.”

As a symbol, Berlin was useful not only as a “focal point for the wider psychological war for Eastern Europe,” but also for the administration’s efforts to maintain “what was at times an uneasy unity within NATO.” There was, after all, another side to Khrushchev’s famous remark that “Berlin is the testicles of the West. Every time I give them a yank, they holler.” For to the Eisenhower administration, Khrushchev’s “yanking” also served the positive psychological purpose of reminding the sometimes jittery allies of the Soviet threat. Beginning with Stalin’s death in March 1953, the Soviet leadership adopted a more constructive approach to diplomacy, abandoning the blustering line of the Stalin years in favor of “peaceful coexistence.” Reflecting a widely held view in the administration, Eisenhower viewed Soviet conciliatory tactics as dangerous psychological threats to free world morale. As Eisenhower explained to Dulles in 1955: “During the Stalin regime, the Soviets seemed to prefer the use of force-or the threat of force-to gain their ends. . . . So long as they used force and the threat of force, we had the world’s natural reaction of fear to aid us in building consolidations of power and strength in

order to resist Soviet advances.” With Stalin gone and his successors waging a vigorous “peace offensive,” the American commitment to defend a “free Berlin” in the face of Khrushchev’s menacing threats was a useful psychological tool to promote allied unity. [5]

Coleman explains that Berlin’s importance to the Eisenhower administration also stemmed from its position as “the hub of U.S. covert and overt anti-Soviet operations in Europe.” Coleman thus revisits the Eisenhower administration’s policy of “rollback” and confirms the importance of psychological warfare to Eisenhower’s foreign policy. Eisenhower did not intervene in the Berlin uprising, Coleman reminds us, because he had rejected the policy of liberation, but because “the uprising had no realistic chance of success.” Propaganda remained an important feature of the Eisenhower administration’s Berlin policy: NSC 5404/1 planned for “‘unrivaled propaganda advantages’ over the Soviet Union by allocating funds for special projects to influence the people of the Soviet zone, by intensifying intelligence activities, and by consolidating British and French support.”

Still it is worth remembering that “rollback” and “liberation” were actually more salient features of Truman’s psychological warfare programs than they were of Eisenhower’s. Anti-Soviet psychological warfare campaigns persisted throughout the Eisenhower presidency, but the Truman administration’s propaganda in Eastern Europe was more provocative and stridently anti-communist than that of his successor. [6] In the “battle for men’s minds,” Eisenhower attached much greater importance to psychological warfare operations in the “free world” than in Communist countries. In any case, Coleman is right to observe that Eisenhower’s anti-Soviet psychological warfare measures combined with the East Berlin riots of June 1953 to “make the Berlin problem even more important to U.S. Cold War strategy.”

#### NOTES:

[1] Khrushchev quoted in John Lewis Gaddis, *We Know Now: Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 140.

[2] Harrison argues that the uprising in East Germany set in motion a chain of developments that culminated in Khrushchev’s Berlin ultimatum in 1958 and the building of the Wall two years later. She stresses that East German influence on Soviet policy during the Berlin crisis was much more important than previously believed. Hope Harrison, “The Bargaining Power of Weaker Allies in Bipolarity and Crisis: The Dynamics of Soviet-East German Relations, 1953-1961,” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1993); idem., “Ulbricht and the Concrete ‘Rose’: New Archival Evidence on the Dynamics of Soviet-East German Relations and the Berlin Crisis, 1958-61,” Cold War International History Project Working Paper #5, <http://cwihip.si.edu/pdf/Wp05.pdf>.

[3] NSC 132/1, “U.S. Policies and Courses of Action to Counter Possible Soviet or Satellite Action Against Berlin,” as quoted by Coleman.

[4] John Foster Dulles, quoted in Coleman.

[5] Khrushchev quoted in Chester J. Pach and Elmo Richardson, *The Presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower*, revised ed. (University of Kansas Press, 1991), 200; Eisenhower to Dulles, 5 December 1955, *Papers of Dwight D. Eisenhower*, vol. 16:1921-3.

[6] Sarah-Jane Corke, "Flexibility or Failure: Eastern Europe and the Dilemmas of Foreign Policy Coordination, 1948-1953"; idem., "Bridging the Gap: Containment, Psychological Warfare and the Search for the Missing Link in American Cold War Policy, 1948-1953", and idem., "History, Historians, and the Naming of Foreign Policy: A Postmodern Approach to American Strategic Thinking in the Truman Administration," papers presented to Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations conferences, June 1997, 1998, and 1999.

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