



CIA, Stability of East Germany in the Berlin Crisis, 15. August 1961

Abschrift

SECRET

STABILITY OF EAST GERMANY IN THE BERLIN CRISIS

Special National Intelligence Estimate Number 12.4-61, 15. August 1961.

Submitted by the Director of Central Intelligence,
concurring in by the United States Intelligence Board

THE PROBLEM

To estimate the ability of the East German regime: (a) to maintain domestic order and stability in the period of tension, and possible later very much sharpened crisis, arising out of the Berlin problem, and (b) to employ its military forces against Western forces under the same circumstances.

SCOPE NOTE

The Berlin crisis is clearly imposing heavy strain on the East German political system. Our purpose in this paper is to examine the political effect on that system of an intensification of circumstances already present in the situation. These are: (a) the East Germans have, with the decree of 13 August, set up tight controls along the borders of West Berlin; (b) the USSR appears to be moving definitely toward unilateral action on the Berlin problem; (c) the US is continuing to display firmness, is taking preparatory military measures, and is engaging in a vigorous political campaign against Soviet and East German contentions regarding Germany; and (d) in consequence an atmosphere of sharp crisis is developing which is understood to carry serious risk of war.

THE ESTIMATE

Elements of Stability and Instability in East Germany

1. After more than a decade of existence, the "German Democratic Republic" has serious continuing problems of popular support. It has failed to overcome anti-Soviet and anti-Communist sentiments and to engage the national feelings of the population. It has had to suffer constant comparison with another, more attractive and successful German state and to combat the Western influence which radiates from West Berlin. Although subsistence has long ceased to be a problem, the East German consumer still encounters numerous spot shortages and exasperating inefficiencies. The East German must endure encroachments upon his personal liberties and his privacy as the regime proceeds with its campaign to politicize all aspects of social life. The ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED) and its leader, Walter Ulbricht, continue to be viewed with contempt by the vast majority of the people.



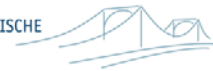
2. Despite these formidable obstacles, the regime has – except for the single episode of 16-17 June 1953 – succeeded in maintaining essential stability. Chief among the sources of stability is the political and military hegemony of the USSR, which is given substance by the presence of about 350,000 Soviet troops in East Germany. Memory of the Soviet readiness to use its military power to suppress the popular uprising in East Germany itself in 1953, and in Hungary in 1956 – and the inability of the West to prevent this suppression – is a powerful damper on any inclination to express disaffection by open action. The East Germany security apparatus has increased in effectiveness since 1953 and is a further deterrent. Moreover, there are many who either have built up a vested interest in the present order or have such roots in the soil and ties to home that they are willing to accommodate themselves. For those who could not make this accommodation, flight to the West has provided a substitute for antiregime activity and was, until 13 August, relatively easy.

3. Open expressions of discontent by the peasantry recently have become more frequent. Last year's sudden collectivization was deeply resented, and continuing pressure to consolidate the new collective farm system is provoking many expressions of outspoken hostility in the countryside. Restlessness now approaches unrest. But despite malingering, threats to leave collectives, and some incendiarism and slaughtering of livestock, the regime shows no sign of reversing its agricultural policies. In general, we believe that while the peasantry will remain sullen, its reactions will probably not exceed the bounds of disconnected local incidents, in part because the rural environment does not favor mass actions of resistance.

4. The regime has accorded the industrial workers a favored role because they are a semiorganized force concentrated in urban areas and therefore are the group which could most easily generate general unrest in the population. By combining coercion and incentives the regime has over the years gained some degree of cooperation from the workers. In recent months, the introduction of highly unpopular labor regulations has aroused the open expression of grievances. But by and large we believe that dissatisfaction of the workers has not reached a point at which a direct challenge to the regime is imminent.

5. Discontent among the intellectuals, students, and professionals is widespread, but leads mainly to the individual solutions of careerism, flight, or accommodation. In the case of doctors and dentists, engineers, teachers, and others with key skills much needed by the regime, special dispensations given to offset dissatisfaction have met with little success. Regime efforts to capture the loyalty of youth have been almost entirely fruitless, and young people, including many with professional training, have constituted a relatively high proportion of the refugee flow.

6. Over recent weeks the situation in East Germany has been marked by a gradual increase of tension in the population. A shortage of consumer goods has been aggravated by the effects of last year's sudden agricultural collectivization; economic plans have had to be scaled down; and regime pronouncements on economic matters have dampened popular expectations that living conditions would soon improve. Even more significant have been the political uncertainties aroused by the Berlin crisis, and by increasing concern that the escape hatch provided by West Berlin would be closed. The outflow of refugees again rose rapidly in July 1961, reaching over 30,000, one of the highest months on record. Finally, with the decree of 13 August, the possibility of flight has been drastically curtailed. On the whole, we still believe that at the present moment a major eruption is unlikely. However, the chances of local disturbances are rising, and under certain circumstances these could develop into general manifestations.



Future Possibilities for Antiregime Action

7. In circumstances of greatly heightened tension, the people of East Germany will be subjected to still greater strains. On the one hand, the appearance of an imminent East-West showdown might have the effect of persuading the East Germans that, with the outcome soon to be determined by the great powers, their best course was to await this result and meanwhile to avoid exposing themselves by overt antiregime actions. Against this consideration, it must be recalled that in previous circumstances – East Germany in 1953, Hungary in 1956 – the buildup of hopes and fears led to popular actions which, by sober calculation, could only be regarded as irrational.

8. It will always be possible that spontaneous incidents of violence, arising perhaps out of some very minor and local dispute, may spread into an outbreak of considerable extent and magnitude. Such developments are essentially unpredictable. They would become more likely if there were any sudden appearance, in the statements or policies of the regime, of contradictions or uncertainties which suggested to the populace that the SED's confidence in its control was faltering. Moreover, the general Western posture as it appeared to the East Germans would be of critical importance; if this posture seemed to suggest that antiregime actions would be materially supported, the more volatile elements of the population would be more inclined to undertake such actions. On balance, we believe that, barring such a combination of circumstances, spontaneous antiregime activities are not likely to exceed passive work slowdowns and possibly local demonstrations of indiscipline and opposition.

9. If the West attempted to stimulate dissidence under conditions of greatly heightened tension, we believe that there would be a response. But the scale of it would depend significantly upon whether the East Germans believed that the West was determined to bring about a drastic change, or that they were merely being used by the West to score a propaganda gain and would then be left at the mercies of the Communist authorities. Short of active East-West combat, we believe that few East Germans would respond to appeals to engage in risky and violent actions, but some would probably be willing to undertake small-scale sabotage. There would probably be a larger response to appeals to undertake passive resistance, such as mass absenteeism, but its scale would depend upon the popular state of mind at any given moment. If passive resistance became widespread, there would also be danger of touching off violence.

10. So long as spontaneous or Western solicited actions were isolated and on a small scale we believe that the East German security forces would be effective in suppressing them. A close check on disaffection is maintained by the secret police and its widespread network of informers. The militarized security forces which are also maintained were not deemed sufficiently reliable to be used in the front line of repression in June 1953, but they have since been built up into a selectively recruited, carefully trained and well equipped force of some 15,000 Alert Police and 35,000 Frontier Police. However, serious disaffection and ineffectiveness within the East German security forces would probably occur in the event of a widespread uprising.

Effect of Allied Military Action

11. If the Berlin crisis reached the point where a Western military force was dispatched to secure the access routes to the city, and clashed with East German and possibly also with Soviet forces, a drastically new element of instability would enter the picture. So long as Western action was avowedly and in fact directed to the limited objective of assuring access and the West sought to discourage the East Germans from action, they would probably not rise up. Moreover, the population



would probably regard the outcome as likely to be determined quickly, and would therefore wish to refrain from committing itself prematurely. Nonetheless, the situation would be precarious and could be upset by any one of many possible developments, or even by mere confusion and false reports.

12. If Western-Soviet/East German fighting should spread into parts of East Germany well away from the autobahn, this would appear to many as the beginning of the liberation of the country, and the chances of a general uprising would greatly increase. If there were actual Western appeals for action, there would probably be a wide response. The reliability and effectiveness of the East German security and military forces would decline rapidly in areas where they were not backed up by superior Soviet military fortunes of the Communist forces vis-a-vis those of the West seemed in doubt or in jeopardy.

East German Military Capabilities

13. The East German Army is one of the best equipped of the Eastern European Satellite armies; its most important deficiency is in heavy artillery. Its size has remained fairly constant, at 75,000 men, organized in four motorized rifle and two tank divisions similar to the most modern Soviet ones. In training exercises, the East German Army has in the last few years displayed a high standard. In recent years, an extensive reserve program has been developed, and there are now about 250,000 trained reserves. Mobilization might raise the army to a total of 10 divisions within 30 days, though this would require Soviet logistic support and supply of weapons and munitions.

14. The German Army is the only Satellite force not based on conscription. There is some pressure, and consequent resentment, in recruitment, but local SED boards pass on all recruits, and political selectivity gives the army a somewhat higher loyalty to the regime than that of the population as a whole. The loyalty of the officer corps and NCO cadre is probably higher than that of the enlisted men. We believe that these factors, together with the German tradition of discipline and submission to military authority, would make the army a relatively reliable force in most circumstances, despite the widespread discontent in East Germany.

15. In the event of a major Allied military effort to secure the access route to Berlin, the Soviets would see considerable political advantage in having East German forces oppose the Allied forces, at least at the outset. The East Germans would be favored by a number of local tactical advantages, including a defensive position. We believe that in such a limited action the East German Army would not prove unreliable or unwilling to fight and would initially give a good account of itself.

16. While the East German Army could independently conduct a brief containing action, if an extended campaign evolved it would require Soviet logistical and combat support, particularly air cover. In any case, the Soviet forces would from the outset be deployed to back up the East Germans. They have conducted combined training exercises, and in a limited Allied-Soviet nonnuclear war in East Germany, the East German divisions would probably be integrated with Soviet field forces. The performance of the troops in such a case would probably be determined largely by the circumstances and fortunes of the conflict, but major disaffection or surrenders would probably not occur unless serious reverses were suffered by the Soviet forces. Their performance might be adversely affected if they had to face West German troops. If, during the course of an Allied conflict in



East Germany, the population of the country rose up in serious disorders or revolted, the reliability of the army would become highly questionable. Reliability of the East German Army would probably be very low if Soviet troops had to be used against the East German population, or if uprisings coincided with Allied successes in the field.

17. The East German Air Force has about 185 fighters, of which 150 are MIG-17's and only 24 are limited all-weather interceptors. These forces are not now deployed for maximum effectiveness against the Western air corridors, but they could operate to harass these corridors. The general air defense system of the country is under Soviet control, but the East Germans man a portion of the radar net in the country and 4 of the 12 surface-to-air missile sites around Berlin. Interference with Allied air access could be mounted by East German efforts, by the Soviets masquerading as East Germans, or by the avowed combined efforts of both. Careful selection of personnel has probably assured a higher degree of reliability in the East German air and air defense forces than in other forces.

[Quelle: National Security Archive/Washington, D.C., Berlin Crisis, Box 35.]