

A Cold War Museum for Berlin

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The Cold War is ancient history to young people now. They have no idea of the underlying issues that fueled the Cold War or how it evolved and affected people's lives. Current college and university students (aged 18-26) were between zero and six years old when the Berlin Wall came down, which is to say they did not live during the Cold War and have no direct understanding of what it was. It really is history to them, seemingly as distant as World War II or maybe even the French Revolution. The Cold War world, of mutually assured destruction, communism vs. capitalism, and Berlin on the front line divided by a wall, has been replaced by fears of terrorism, global warming, and financial crisis.

The rich and complicated history of Berlin, particularly in the twentieth century, has resulted in a plethora of museums, monuments and memorials to highlight that history. Yet there is no museum dedicated to displaying the history of the Cold War era in a comprehensive way, including the central role of Berlin as a subject and object of the Cold War, the global reach of the Cold War, and its origins, evolution and denouement. In a city that stands out in the world for its role in history, its history museums and historical sites, there needs to be one more: a Museum of the Cold War.

This became very clear to me in the summer of 2008 when I brought to Berlin a group of fifteen master's students from the Elliott School of International Affairs at The George Washington University in Washington, D.C. We were joined in Berlin by five students from the Free University of Berlin for a two-week course I taught on 'History, Memory and Politics in Berlin'. For the first week, we visited museums, monuments and memorials related to the Nazi period, the Holocaust, and World War II, and there was more than enough to give the students a clear sense of the history and the historical context of these world-changing events (with the exception of the still-to-be completed Topography of Terror), beginning with the Jewish Museum, the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe (and the associated documentation center), the House of the Wannsee Conference, the Memorial Museums of Sachsenhausen and Ravensbrück (just outside of Berlin), and the German Historical Museum. But for the second week on the Cold War and the division of Germany and Berlin, while there are several important museums, memorials and historical sites to visit (including the German Historical Museum, the Allied Museum, the German-Russian Museum at Berlin-Karlshorst, the Checkpoint Charlie Museum, the GDR Museum, the Stasi Memorial Center at Berlin-Hohen-

schönhausen, the Berlin Wall Documentation Center at Bernauer Straße, the Stasi Documentation Center, and the Märkisches Museum), a museum that puts it all in the context of the forty-five year epoch that was the Cold War is sorely lacking. These valuable museums all have their own focus, which is either much narrower or broader than the Cold War. None of the museums provides a clear picture of the causes, evolution, and demise of the Cold War and the central place of Berlin and Germany in these. For people who did not live through the Cold War or experience life in divided Berlin, a good museum could give them a sense of both.

In the nearly twenty years since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the opening of government archives in the former Soviet bloc, China and elsewhere and the ongoing declassification of documents in the West have allowed historians to write or rewrite the history of the Cold War. Accordingly, the history of the Cold War has become a real area of expertise for historians around the world: in Germany, the US, Russia, China, England, Hungary, Poland, France, etc. There are centres for Cold War studies in Washington, D.C., Cambridge, Massachusetts, Santa Barbara, California, London, Shanghai, Moscow, Florence and Rome, Oslo, and Copenhagen. In Berlin and Potsdam, the Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung, the Stiftung zur Aufarbeitung der SED-Diktatur and a department of the Institut für Zeitgeschichte devote much of their attention to the Cold War period.

We now know so much more about the Cold War than we did before the fall of the Wall – about Berlin's role as the front-line city of the Cold War and about the role of the two Germanys in the Cold War, but also about broader factors driving the confrontation. Research by historians since the end of the Cold War has found that key smaller allies of the superpowers played a more significant role in the Cold War than previously understood – allies such as East and West Germany, North and South Korea, North and South Vietnam, and Cuba.¹ For example, during the Berlin Crisis of 1958–1961, the two superpowers were significantly constrained in their actions by the leaders of East and West Germany. Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev was frustrated that East German leader Walter Ulbricht consistently pushed for closure of the border in Berlin instead of finding other, more subtle ways to stem the flow of refugees from East to West; indeed, the Kremlin rulers resisted Ulbricht's pleas for eight years until giving in and sealing off the border in Berlin.² US presidents Dwight D. Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy were exasperated with the West German Chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, for his unyielding policies toward the

¹ Tony Smith, *New Bottles for New Wine. A Pericentric Framework for the Study of the Cold War*, in: *Diplomatic History* 24 (2000), pp. 567-591; Melvyn P. Leffler, *Inside Enemy Archives. The Cold War Reopened*, in: *Foreign Affairs* 75 (1996) 4, pp. 120-135.

² Hope M. Harrison, *Driving the Soviets Up the Wall. Soviet-East German Relations, 1953–1961*, Princeton 2003.

East Germans and Soviets over Berlin, but felt they could not risk alienating him by ignoring his wishes.³ There were other times in the Cold War when the East and West German leaders sought a more conciliatory policy than their superpower patrons did, as in the early to mid-1980s in the wake of the deployment by the Warsaw Pact and NATO of intermediate range nuclear weapons in Europe.

Recent work by scholars has shed light on other key turning points in the Cold War, including the Marshall Plan, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Vietnam War, and the end of the Cold War. While for the West, the Marshall Plan of 1947 was meant to help reconstruct European democracies after World War II, for the Soviets it represented a key Cold War move to expand American influence in Europe.⁴ In June 1948, when the West prefaced the introduction of Marshall Plan aid to its zones of Berlin and Germany with a currency reform, the Soviets responded by blockading ground routes to West Berlin. Post-Cold War oral history conferences about the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 (which President Kennedy assumed was a Soviet ploy to put pressure on the Western position in Berlin) with former American, Soviet and Cuban policymakers have revealed that, contrary to public knowledge, President Kennedy actually did agree to a missile trade (after the Soviet removed theirs from Cuba, the US would quietly make sure that NATO missiles were removed from Turkey) and that the crisis was even more dangerous than we knew due to the presence of Soviet short-range missiles in Cuba and rather vague rules of engagement in which a local Soviet commander may have had the authority to launch a nuclear weapon without explicit approval from Moscow.⁵ And new information from Russian archives highlights Gorbachev's poor grasp of the economic, political and security consequences of his policies which led to the end of the Cold War⁶ (and benefited Berlin and Germany tremendously).

A Cold War Museum would highlight the interaction between developments in Berlin and Germany and the broader East-West confrontation of the Cold War with examples such as the following: the rearmament of West Germany after World War II was connected to the North Korean attack on

³ William Burr, *Avoiding the Slippery Slope. The Eisenhower Administration and the Berlin Crisis, November 1958 – January 1959*, in: *Diplomatic History* 18 (1994), pp. 177–205; Kara Stibora Fulcher, *A Sustainable Position? The United States, the Federal Republic, and the Ossification of Allied Policy on Germany, 1958–1962*, in: *Diplomatic History* 26 (2002), pp. 283–307.

⁴ Scott D. Parrish/Mikhail M. Narinsky, *New Evidence on the Soviet Rejection of the Marshall Plan, 1947: Two Reports*, Working Paper No. 9, Cold War International History Project, March 1994, <<http://www.wilsoncenter.org/topics/pubs/ACFB73.pdf>>.

⁵ Graham Allison/Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision. Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 2nd ed. New York 1999; James G. Blight/David A. Welch (eds.), *Intelligence and the Cuban Missile Crisis*, London 1998.

⁶ Vladislav Zubok, *A Failed Empire. The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev*, Chapel Hill 2007.

South Korea in 1950; the East German leadership constructed the Wandlitz compound in the wake of the Hungarian Uprising in 1956; West German eagerness to have a closer relationship with France via the Elysée Treaty of 1963 in part stemmed from concern about relying on Washington after the Berlin Crisis of 1958–1961 and the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962; and Warsaw Pact intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968 was spurred on by the East German leadership who feared the ‘contagion’ of the Prague Spring. Such a museum could also give visitors a sense of what it was like to live on the ‘island’ of West Berlin surrounded by communist East Germany,⁷ how Turkish guest workers were brought in to work in West Berlin and West Germany, how East Germans coped with the Berlin Wall and the Stasi, and how family members and friends maintained connections across the Wall. School students could conduct interviews with people who lived in divided Berlin to help establish an oral history collection at the museum.

While there is much new evidence to expand our knowledge of the Cold War, there are still ongoing disagreements among experts about some of the fundamental questions of the Cold War, including the roots of its beginning and ending. After decades at the centre of conflicting interpretations of the Cold War, Berlin and its Cold War Museum could become a centre for the pooling of knowledge about this era and could cooperate with museums and scholars from around the world to do this. The museum could portray, for example, the ways that superpower policies as well as the actions and behaviour of local Germans and Berliners contributed to hardening the lines of division in the mid- to late 1940s. Similarly, the museum could illustrate the roles of Gorbachev and Reagan, Walesa and Pope John Paul II, as well as the brave protestors on the streets of Leipzig and Berlin in bringing down the Berlin Wall and ending the Cold War. The role of China in switching sides, the impact of détente, the war in Afghanistan, the economic weaknesses of communism, and the ‘soft power’ of Western culture would also have to be considered in examining the end of the Cold War.

A Cold War Museum in Berlin could highlight the role of Europe in the Cold War. Indeed, the Cold War began and ended on the ground in Europe even if many of the key decisions were made in Washington and Moscow. Essential moments to highlight include the Czech communist coup of 1948, the East European uprisings and their suppression in 1953, 1956, and 1968, martial law in Poland in 1980–81, but also the importance of Willy Brandt’s *Ostpolitik*, the détente years, and the Helsinki Act of 1975.⁸ It would be crucial to demonstrate the web of ties that developed between East and West particu-

⁷ *Zeitschrift für Ideengeschichte* 2 (2008) 4: Die Insel West-Berlin.

⁸ Leopoldo Nuti (ed.), *The Crisis of Détente in Europe. From Helsinki to Gorbachev, 1975–1985*, London 2008; James E. Miller et al. (eds.), *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Vol. XXIX: Eastern Europe, Eastern Mediterranean, 1969–1972*, Washington 2008.

larly as a result of détente to make the point that the Cold War was not just about conflict. The expansion of West German ties, particularly economic, with the countries of Eastern Europe is an important part of the story to be told, as are the role of Hungary in dismantling its barbed wire border with Austria in May 1989 and of Poland's Solidarność in the June 1989 elections.

The Cold War era has effects in our world today from the ongoing process of the unification of former eastern and western Germany, the continued division of Korea, and Russia's efforts to adjust to a post-imperial condition, to questions concerning the mission of NATO, the war in Afghanistan, and conflict in the Middle East. A broad understanding of the Cold War and its lessons for today (contentious though they may be) is important for informed citizens of the world. A Cold War Museum in Berlin could help provide this as well as sponsor visiting exhibits from countries around the world, a lecture series presenting new findings about the international history of the Cold War, and a movie series showing films from the Cold War period.

In July of 2008, I took another group of students, this time doctoral students, to a conference on the Cold War at the Center for Cold War International History Studies at East China Normal University in Shanghai. As we walked into their beautiful new Center in Shanghai, we were faced with a fantastic wall showing a massive rear-lit map of the world highlighting key sites of the Cold War. There were arrows and dates pointing to Berlin, Cuba, Hiroshima, Angola, Vietnam, Korea, the Taiwan Straits, Moscow, Washington, and many other places. As we kept walking down the hallway, we came to another huge rear-lit display on the wall of every year of the Cold War (1945–1991) with pictures of the leaders of seven major countries for each year – the US, the USSR, China, England, France, Japan, Vietnam and North Korea. Even if Germans or Americans might pick a different group of seven countries or an expanded group, it was an impressive display of the scope of the Cold War in a city that occupied nothing like the central role that Berlin did in the Cold War. It again convinced me that the time is ripe for a Cold War Museum in Berlin to tell the story of this epoch of world history. It was in Berlin that communism and capitalism, authoritarianism and democracy rubbed shoulders. It was in Berlin, and nowhere else, that US and Soviet tanks stood off directly against each other for a tense period in October 1961 at Checkpoint Charlie. It was in Berlin that the division of Europe and the world was made concrete with a Wall and a death strip. And it was in Berlin that this division was breached peacefully by the people on 9 November 1989, serving as the symbol of the end of the Cold War. It is therefore in Berlin that a Cold War Museum should be built for all to learn about this transformative era.

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