

'Ulbricht blocks mass exodus: Iron Curtain right across Berlin' from the Süddeutsche Zeitung (14 August 1961)

Caption: On 14 August 1961, the German daily newspaper Süddeutsche Zeitung paints an alarming picture of the situation in Berlin after the decision by the German Democratic Republic (GDR) to erect an impassable border between East and West Berlin during the night of 12 to 13 August.

Source: Süddeutsche Zeitung. Münchner Neueste Nachrichten aus Politik, Kultur, Wirtschaft und Sport. Hrsg. Friedmann, Werner; Goldschagg, Edmund; Schöningh, Dr. Franz Josef; Schwingenstein, August ; R Herausgeber Friedmann, Werner. 14.-15.08.1961, Nr. 193-194 ; 17. Jg. München: Süddeutscher Verlag. "Ulbrichts Schlag gegen die Massenflucht : Eiserner Vorhang mitten durch Berlin", p. 1; 2.

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Ulbricht blocks mass exodus: Iron Curtain right across Berlin

On the basis of a declaration by the Warsaw Pact states, the German SED (Socialist Unity Party) regime blocks free movement within the city and with the Eastern Zone / The People's Army is deployed in the eastern sector / Interzonal traffic not affected

(SZ) On Saturday night, the Ulbricht regime sealed off the borders between West Berlin and the Eastern Zone and the sector boundaries within the city of Berlin. He took this measure in response to the demand of the Warsaw Pact member states, which had proposed to the Eastern Zone Government that it should 'ensure such order at the West Berlin border as to reliably bar the way to any agitation directed against the Socialist bloc countries.' The direct suburban and underground train services between East and West Berlin and the service with the Eastern Zone border areas around West Berlin were interrupted. GDR citizens can cross to West Berlin only at the few checkpoints, with special permission from their Government. The People's Army and the People's Police erected barbed-wire fences at almost every road checkpoint. These barriers are to remain in place 'until a peace treaty is concluded.' The purpose clearly is to take drastic measures to stem the flood of refugees heading for West Berlin, which rose again on the Saturday. The erection of an Iron Curtain right across Berlin has provoked violent protest throughout the Western world. The West Berlin Senate described the SED regime's measures as a terrible injustice.

Berlin (UPI)

On Sunday, East Berlin looked like an army camp. Some 25 Soviet T-34 tanks had taken up position in the ruins near the avenue called 'Unter den Linden', and 250 trucks filled with troops and People's Police moved in. It was reminiscent of the day a state of siege was declared on 17 June 1953. This display of military power is obviously meant to nip in the bud any risk of popular protest at the closure of the borders.

Specifically, these restrictive measures provide as follows:

1. Residents of East Berlin and the Soviet Union may enter West Berlin only with a special pass. Similarly, strict controls have been imposed on travel within the Federal Republic of Germany. The Soviet Zone Government announced that all the border controls would be carried out in the same way as controls at 'sovereign state' borders.
2. The 52 000 inhabitants of East Berlin and the Eastern Zone suburbs working in West Berlin must give up their jobs. The East Berlin Court has told them to look for new jobs in East Berlin.
3. The suburban and underground train services from East to West Berlin have been virtually suspended. Suburban and underground trains basically run on only one line, which begins and ends at the East Berlin Friedrichstrasse station. Trains from West Germany end there too. Passengers have to pass through checkpoints before entering or departing from that station.

The Soviet Zone Government and the Warsaw Pact states gave specific assurances that these measures would not affect inter-Zone transport to West Berlin by land, sea or air.

As has been the case since last autumn, residents of the Federal Republic who want to travel to East Berlin still need a day pass. West Berliners who want to enter the Soviet sector have to present an identity card. All but 13 of the 80 checkpoints between East and West Berlin have been closed. The entire border has been manned by armed People's Police and border police. Barbed-wire fences and road blocks have been set up, trenches dug and paving stones torn out and piled up into barricades.

These measures do not affect travel by members of the Western Allied occupying forces or the diplomatic corps. In view of the tense situation, the 12 000-strong West Berlin police force has been put on alert. The American troops in Berlin are on stand-by. American army helicopters are patrolling the sector boundary.

Although the Western Allies and the Berlin Senate issued strong statements describing the actions of the East Berlin authorities as a 'flagrant and serious breach of the four-power status in Berlin', the general tendency in West Berlin was to avoid under all circumstances any rash action that would exacerbate the explosive mood in the city.

The West Berlin Senate held a special session, chaired by the Governing Mayor, Willy Brandt, who interrupted his election campaigning in the Federal Republic immediately after these events and flew back to Berlin. Brandt met the Allied military governors to discuss the situation. The Senate is in constant contact with the Federal Government and the Allies. The West Berlin House of Representatives was convened for a special session.

At its special session, the West Berlin Senate adopted a statement calling on the Western powers to make 'energetic representations' in Moscow. The Senate declared that the East Berlin measures did not just create injustice but virtually meant the erection of the 'perimeter fence of a concentration camp'. The Senate said that it would bring charges before the whole world against those who 'divided Germany, oppressed East Berlin and threatened West Berlin.'

The Governing Mayor, Brandt, described the forcible division of Berlin as an 'outrageous injustice'. In a television broadcast, he laid particular emphasis on the contradiction of not even allowing Eastern Zone residents to travel to East Berlin, supposedly the capital of the Soviet Zone.

Speaking at a press conference, Brandt said that the Pankow measures not only 'affected but went to the very heart' of the four-power agreements on Berlin. In particular, the 1949 agreements, concluded at the end of the blockade, had been treated 'as a worthless piece of paper'. In reply to a question about possible countermeasures, Brandt said that 'firm steps at high level' were being considered, in order to counteract what he called the 'piecemeal demilitarisation and neutralisation' of Berlin.

The military occupation of East Berlin by People's Army units was not an isolated action. Numerous reports came from the suburbs of Berlin about movements of Soviet army tank units. For instance, the inter-Zone Berlin-Helmstedt motorway and the inter-Zone road between Hamburg and Berlin were temporarily blocked by Soviet Army tank units deployed near Berlin. It was taken as agreed that none of the troop movements was directed against West Berlin and that their only purpose was to meet Soviet and Pankow security requirements.

Eyewitnesses described the mood of the inhabitants of East Berlin as explosive. Cries of open derision at rabble-rousing SED officials and booing as the tanks moved in could be heard from hundreds of yards away. Incidents occurred in the district of Prenzlauer Berg and on the eastern side of the Brandenburg Gate, as well as between the Brandenburg Gate and Potsdamer Platz on the western side of the sector boundary.

During the clashes in the Soviet sector, the People's Police and SED combat units, sometimes with their sub-machine guns cocked, moved in against the loudly protesting crowds. A total of 700 to 800 individuals were involved in these clashes. When West Berliners tried to tear down a barbed-wire fence at the sector boundary near the Brandenburg Gate, they came up against People's Police with fixed bayonets. The West Berlin police addressed the crowds from loudspeaker vans, calling for calm.