

Statement by Chancellor Adenauer to the Bundestag on the building of the Berlin Wall (Bonn, 18 August 1961)

Caption: On 18 August 1961, the German Chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, makes a statement to the Bundestag condemning the closure of the border between West and East Berlin by the authorities in the Soviet occupation zone during the night of 12–13 August 1961.

Source: Berlin (1944-1962), Dossier de l'affaire de Berlin, préparé par A. Molter, rapporteur. Paris: Assemblée de l'Union de l'Europe occidentale, 1962. 68 p. p. 44-48.

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Since the early morning of 13th August, the rulers in the Soviet-occupied zone of Germany have brought traffic between the Soviet sector and the three western sectors of Berlin to an almost complete standstill. Along the sector border barbed-wire entanglements have been put up, large units of the People's Police and border police have taken up position on the sector border in order to block all traffic between East and West Berlin. At the same time troops of the National People's Army have been installed in East Berlin.

These measures to obstruct traffic were effected in accordance with a decision taken on 12th August by the rulers of the Soviet-occupied zone of Germany. In executing that decision the Ulbricht régime clearly and unmistakably announced to the whole world the political bankruptcy of its 16-year-old despotism. These measures constitute the Ulbricht régime's admission of the fact that it is not supported by the free will of the German people living in that zone. By these measures the Ulbricht régime confirms that the exercise of the right of self-determination by the German people should no longer be delayed for the sake of maintaining world peace.

These illegal measures – which the Federal Government notes with dismay and disgust – are a flagrant violation of the four-power agreements on freedom of movement within Greater Berlin and of the four-power agreements for the regulation of traffic between Berlin and the Soviet-occupied zone of Germany.

By blocking traffic between East and West Berlin the régime in the Soviet-occupied zone of Germany has unilaterally and with brutal force violated the existing four-power agreements regarding Berlin recognised to this day by the USSR.

The Federal Government notes with deep regret that this reckless act has been carried out with the consent of the Government of the USSR as the leading power in the Warsaw Pact. In giving its consent the Soviet Government has contradicted its own constant assertions about wanting to solve the problem of Germany and Berlin by means of negotiations. Whilst the American President at his last press conference on 10th August expressed anew the readiness of the United States Government to negotiate on the problem of Germany and Berlin, the rulers of the Soviet-occupied zone of Germany have reacted to the West's desire for peace and negotiation by taking military measures. This reaction demonstrates, more strikingly than any words possibly could, to the whole world that the present crisis has been touched off alone by the German and Berlin policy pursued by the Soviets.

It was the Government of the Soviet Union which, through its statements on 10th November 1958, initiated the Berlin crisis. In the meantime that Government has pointed out in countless notes and statements that irrespective of its other aims it did not contemplate infringing upon the freedom of West Berlin but would, on the contrary, solemnly guarantee that freedom. How can these statements be reconciled with the events of the last few days? The agreements of the Soviet Union with the three western powers were torn up, and the tanks of the People's Army, the People's Police and the Factory Combat Groups which have been concentrated in and around East Berlin in order to give military support to that illegal attack on the status of the City of Berlin, offer a foreboding of what would be the nature of the guarantee to be given to a so-called free city.

On 13th August 1961, the world was witness to the first step along the way to the realisation of the stated aims. The four-power statute of the City of Berlin, valid under international law, has been broken once more. That latest measure is at the same time the gravest and most brutal. The barricades set up within Berlin and between Berlin and the Soviet-occupied zone by the zonal authorities at the behest of their masters are obviously meant to foreshadow the cutting-off of the free part of the German capital from the free world.

In its decision of 12th August the puppet régime in the Soviet-occupied zone of Germany makes the futile attempt to motivate the alleged necessity of blocking all freedom of movement. It is beneath the dignity of the Federal Government to refute these distortions and false assertions in detail. They are gainsaid by reality

itself.

The Federal Government wants, however, to state emphatically that by this illegal action the rulers of the Soviet-occupied zone of Germany have shown to the whole world once and for all in which part of Germany militarism and aggression are practised.

In its very latest note of 3rd August 1961, the Soviet Union – in renewing its demand for the conclusion of a so-called peace treaty and for the transformation of the valid four-power status of the City of Berlin, or rather of West Berlin only, into a so-called free city – based that demand on the assertion that such measures were necessary to meet an alleged militarism and revanchism in the Federal Republic.

The Soviet Government again attempted to create the impression that responsible quarters in the Federal Republic intended to prepare for aggressive action against the Soviet Union or against some other State in the world. Anyone who comes to the Federal Republic can convince himself of the opposite, and the overwhelming majority of all the States throughout the world agree with us in the estimation of our peaceful policy directed exclusively to the defence of our vital interests. Anyone who today goes into East Berlin or the Soviet-occupied zone of Germany can see for himself that measures have been taken there which in the true sense of the word deserve to be termed military and revanchist. These measures have, moreover, been applied at a time when the whole world is filled with the one hope that there may not be any warlike conflict. In such a situation, grave enough in itself, the rulers of the Soviet-occupied zone, through military preparations, are playing dangerously with fire.

The Federal Government considers it essential to draw the attention of world public opinion to the true causes of that policy of force. It is not any militaristic and revanchist policies by the Federal Government, as alleged, that have caused the rulers of the Soviet zone of Germany to disclose their true intentions. Their action is the result of their refusal to let the people in the Soviet-occupied zone of Germany live according to the way of life which they desire. It is both macabre and grotesque when the spokesmen of the Ulbricht régime stand up and declare that the Germans in the Soviet-occupied zone have already exercised their right of self-determination. The permanent flow of refugees in recent weeks tells a different story – i.e. the true story. It is instructive to recall at what juncture the tide of refugees began to rise again. That was when the heavy threats by the Soviet Premier to conclude a peace treaty with the Soviet-occupied zone of Germany brought home to the people living there the hopelessness of their situation. For these people, the announcement of a treaty of separation was a nightmare from which they wanted to escape under any circumstances. In their desperation they saw no other way out than to leave their homes in the Soviet-occupied zone, abandoning their possessions and risking their lives, in order to begin a new life in freedom and start all over again in the Federal Republic. Their free decision to renounce their homeland was the only way in which they could practise what remained of their right to self-determination. There was nothing left for them but to “vote with their feet”. By that vote these people have shown the world what they really want: they want freedom, not bondage.

Reliable documentation in the hands of the Federal Government shows that, despite sixteen years of a reign of terror by Communist functionaries in the Soviet-occupied zone of Germany, over 90 % of the Germans living there reject the régime which oppresses them, despise the slave state forcibly imposed on them, and wish for nothing more ardently than to be united with the Germans who live in freedom.

The Soviet Union keeps asserting that the present valid status of the City of Berlin is one of the causes of existing tensions. It is really not necessary to reiterate that that assertion is incorrect. But it is certainly indicated to point out emphatically that solving the problem of Germany on the basis of self-determination would be the best if not the only way to eliminate tensions and difficulties. Such a solution would indeed be a genuine contribution towards maintaining and securing peace in the world.

In this grave situation, created by the lawless action of the rulers of the Soviet-occupied zone of Germany, the Federal Government keeps most closely in touch with its three western allies. Together with them it will prepare the necessary measures.

The Federal Government and its allies concur in their appraisal of the dangers threatening the free world. For Foreign Ministers of the three western powers and of the Federal Republic assembled for consultation in Paris two weeks ago. I can state with particular satisfaction that those consultations were held in a spirit of full mutual agreement. They were supplemented and confirmed by a detailed consultation between the four powers and all the other members of NATO. Thus it has been possible to achieve full agreement on the basic western attitude, not only between ourselves and the western powers immediately concerned in the settlement of the German question, but also between all the NATO partners. After his discussions with the Foreign Ministers of France, Great Britain and the Federal Republic, the United States Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, informed the NATO Council who on this occasion again and unequivocally gave expression to the determination of all NATO countries to maintain the freedom of Berlin. At the same time the NATO Council reiterated its conviction that a peaceful and equitable solution to the problem of Germany, including Berlin, could only be achieved on the basis of the whole German nation's right to self-determination. We shall continue these contacts in the coming weeks and months and shall, in closest agreement with each other, jointly take such action as may be necessary to ward off any Soviet attempts at curtailing the freedom of Berlin.

Whilst, however, the western powers and especially the Federal Government representing the free part of Germany have shown an almost infinite measure of patience in attempting to bring about a settlement of these problems, avoiding any step likely to strain or exacerbate the international situation any further, the Soviet Union considers that it can solve these problems by sanctioning illegal actions of the zonal rulers in a manner contrary to law and the requirements of political reason. In this situation, Europe and the North Atlantic Defence Alliance simply have to prepare for the measures that are necessary to maintain our security and freedom. The Federal Government has taken note with great satisfaction of the excellent statement made by President Kennedy to the American people on 25th July. The Federal Government fully concurs with this statement. It shares the view that the West must, by uniting its military strength, prepare for the challenge directed against it. We know, and the Soviet Union knows, that the total military potential of the West is superior to that of the Soviet Union. Hence the threats directed from time to time against one or other of the NATO partners by the Soviet Government to the effect that it would devastate their territory by atomic bombs, are dangerous, the Soviet Government must know that by any such blow it would touch off a counter-blow by which it would be annihilated.

The Federal Republic of Germany, too, will have to take measures within the framework of the Atlantic Defence Organisation to strengthen its military preparedness in order to assist and complement the efforts made particularly by the United States but also to a considerable extent by the other NATO partners. At this moment, when the fate of Berlin, when our fate is at stake, it is a dictate of self-preservation for us to declare our solidarity with our western allies and jointly with them to undertake the efforts that are necessary to meet the danger threatening us.

Yet we are far from seeing in military measures a solution to the crisis artificially engendered by the Soviet Union. The Federal Government is not convinced that the Soviet Premier wishes to touch off a war that would devastate his own country, too. In fact, the Federal Government believes that it is possible now as before to find a way out of the situation in which the world finds itself, by means of negotiation. It is ready to support any approach to negotiations between the four powers responsible for Berlin and Germany as a whole. The Federal Government thinks it indispensable, however, to point out that the unilateral action taken by the rulers of the Soviet zone of Germany with the consent of the Government of the USSR is a strain on the readiness to negotiate shown by the West.

The Federal Government will nevertheless not abandon its hope that negotiations may soon be started that will enable the German problem and thus the Berlin question to be solved on the basis of the right of self-determination of nations.

The principle that all nations should be given the right to determine their own national system is making headway irresistibly throughout the world. The Federal Government is confident that it will prove possible to put this principle into effect in the heart of Europe, too, where today the right of self-determination is still being denied to 16 million Germans. The Federal Government has repeatedly stated, and reiterates on this

occasion, that it is prepared to co-operate in plans giving the Soviet Union security guarantees in the event of a reunification of Germany. The latest statement to this effect was made by me in this house on 17th June of this year. This intention of the Federal Government has not changed. The restoration of German unity would not only serve the cause of peace but also the well-considered security interests of the Soviet Union and would benefit all other nations.

The three western allies, who pursuant to the four-power agreement have undertaken a special commitment with regard to Berlin and Germany, have addressed an emphatic protest and a serious warning to the Soviet Union. They have designated the measures taken as illegal and as an irresponsible unilateral violation of existing arrangements. They have rightly repudiated the dishonest assertion contained in the so-called recommendation of the Warsaw Pact States alleging that these measures are in the interests of the German people; and they have emphasised that that assertion is nothing but an interference with the internal affairs of the German people.

What the German people think about those brutal measures could easily be found out. It would suffice to put this question to all Germans in the Federal Republic, in the Soviet-occupied zone and in the whole of Berlin. The answer would be a passionate condemnation by the overwhelming majority of the German people.

The Federal Government has the right and the duty to speak for the entire German people, including those Germans who are condemned to silence by the despotic measures taken in the Soviet-occupied zone of Germany. The Federal Government appeals urgently to the Soviet Union at this critical moment to find its way back to a realistic manner of looking at things. It should be beneath the dignity of a great nation to protect creatures who are despised by their own fellow-citizens. The Soviet Government and the Soviet people should not lend themselves to co-operating in the conversion into a concentration camp of part of a large neighbouring country against the will of its inhabitants. It should be realised in Moscow that throughout the world all those who believe in the right of self-determination of nations as recognised in the United Nations Charter can only feel profound contempt for a régime that tramples this right of self-determination underfoot. A reformation of relations between the Soviet people and the German people is not possible along the lines pursued by the authorities of the Soviet zone of Germany. The Germans in that zone have come to hate and despise those who violate them in so inhuman a manner. And they must be having similar feelings towards those who support that system. The closing of the border is an unprecedented admission of bankruptcy. It shows that the people who are compelled to live in that part of Germany can be prevented only by the use of physical force from leaving that paradise of workers and farmers.

There is but one possibility of placing relations between the Soviet and German peoples on a new foundation: the German people must be given back the right, denied to no people on earth, to form, through a free and uninfluenced expression of their will, a government which would then be truly entitled to speak, act and decide on behalf of the whole German nation.

The Federal Government moreover appeals to the governments of all those nations throughout the world who have signed or accepted the United Nations Charter. The measures carried out or announced by the Soviet zone authorities are, in fact, a flagrant violation of that basic law which is meant to be just as valid for the interior order of all nations as it is for the relations between them.

It is with deep emotion that the Federal Government is mindful of the personal fates of the many millions who have fallen victim to those inhuman measures. Nearly three and a half million people have in recent years fled the Soviet-occupied zone of Germany and the eastern sector of Berlin because no other possibility of living a life in freedom was left to them. Relinquishing their occupations and leaving behind their property, they also broke off personal ties with their families, relatives and friends. Now the door has been slammed in the face of countless people intending to take the same road. The Federal Government expresses the hope, and indeed the conviction, that at the beginning of the negotiations, which it too desires, those measures will be revoked. Nothing would be better suited to convince the German people that such negotiations would serve the maintenance of world peace and contribute to a durable reorganisation of relations between the nations.

It is not enough to speak of peace; words to this effect should be followed by deeds to show that peace must exist not only between the nations but even more so and quite particularly within the nations. Every individual has a right to live in peace. Absence of freedom is the most horrid form of peacelessness.

The Federal Government and with it all Germans in the Federal Republic of Germany feel in these days particularly close to the Germans in the Soviet-occupied zone. We are all aware of the obligation that we have explicitly taken upon us when adopting our Basic Law. We stated at the time that we acted also on behalf of those Germans to whom participation was denied. To the entire German people on both sides of the zonal border we addressed our appeal to complete in free self-determination the unity and freedom of Germany. Our fellow-citizens in the Soviet-occupied zone should even in these critical days not doubt for a moment that we shall never slacken in striving passionately for the attainment of this great objective. We are sure of the support of all free nations in the world, and we have no doubt that the legitimate national concern of the whole German people will find its fulfilment. The tenacious determination of all Germans in all parts of our country is a prerequisite to such success; no-one in the world should ever doubt the determination and steadfastness of the Germans in this vital problem of our people.

Let me finally say a few words to the inhabitants of the eastern sector of Berlin and the Soviet zone of Germany. Your sorrow and suffering are our sorrow and suffering. In your particularly difficult situation you were able at least to derive some comfort from the thought that, if your lot should become quite unbearable, you could mend it by fleeing. Now it looks as if you have been deprived of this comfort, too. I request you with all my heart: do not abandon all hope of a better future for yourselves and your children. We are convinced that the free world, and particularly we here, will some day be successful in our efforts to obtain freedom for you. The right to self-determination will continue its victorious march throughout the world and will not halt at the boundary of the Soviet zone. Believe me, the day will come when you will be united with us in freedom. We do not stand alone in the world; justice is on our side, and so are all the nations who love freedom.