

Note from the United States to the Soviet Union on the status of Berlin (31 December 1958)

Caption: On 31 December 1958, in reply to the Soviet note dated 27 November 1958, the United States Administration reaffirms its support for West Berlin and refutes the arguments put forward by the Soviet Union in support of a change in the status of the City of Berlin.

Source: United States-Department of State. Documents on Germany 1944-1985. Washington: Department of State, [s.d.]. 1421 p. (Department of State Publication 9446). p. 573-576.

Copyright: United States of America Department of State

URL:

http://www.cvce.eu/obj/note_from_the_united_states_to_the_soviet_union_on_the_status_of_berlin_31_december_1958-en-2e66afdb-aa14-4eb2-9080-a20bfc8f824f.html

Last updated: 03/07/2015

Note from the United States to the Soviet Union on the status of Berlin and the Potsdam Agreements (31 December 1958)

The Government of the United States acknowledges the note which was addressed to it by the Government of the U.S.S.R. under date of November 27.

The note contains a long elaboration on the events which preceded and followed the last war. It attempts to portray the Western Powers — France, the United Kingdom and the United States — as supporters of Hitlerism as against the Soviet Union. This portrayal is in sharp contrast with the actual facts. In this connection we refer to the contemporaneous statement made by the Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs to the Supreme Soviet of the U.S.S.R. on October 31, 1939. In that statement he refers, among other things, to the “conclusion of the Soviet-German non-aggression pact of August 23” and points out “we now had a rapprochement and the establishment of friendly relations between the U.S.S.R. and Germany”. The statement goes on to assail the British and French Governments for their opposition to Hitlerism in the following language: “The ruling circles of Britain and France have been lately attempting to depict themselves as champions of the democratic rights of nations against Hitlerism, and the British Government has announced that its aim in the war with Germany is nothing more nor less than the ‘destruction of Hitlerism’ ... everybody will understand that an ideology cannot be destroyed by force, that it cannot be eliminated by war. It is therefore not only senseless, but criminal to wage such a war — a war for the ‘destruction of Hitlerism’ camouflaged as a fight for ‘democracy’.”

The situation of Berlin of which the Soviet Government complains and which it considers abnormal is a result of the very nature of the German problem such as it has existed since 1945. When the empire of Hitler collapsed the Western Allies were in military possession of more than one-third of what subsequently was occupied by the Soviet authorities.

The Soviet Union was in possession of Berlin. On the basis of the agreements of September 12, 1944 and May 1, 1945, the Western Allies withdrew, thereby permitting a Soviet occupation of large parts of Mecklenburg, Saxony, Thuringia and Anhalt, and concurrently, the three Western Powers occupied the western sectors in Berlin, then an area of rubble.

The Soviet Union has directly and through its puppet regime — the so-called German Democratic Republic — consolidated its hold over the large areas which the Western Allies relinquished to it. It now demands that the Western Allies should relinquish the positions in Berlin which in effect were the *quid pro quo*.

The three Western Powers are there as occupying powers and they are not prepared to relinquish the rights which they acquired through victory just as they assume the Soviet Union is not willing now to restore to the occupancy of the Western Powers the position which they had won in Mecklenburg, Saxony, Thuringia and Anhalt and which, under the agreements of 1944 and 1945, they turned over for occupation by the Soviet Union.

The agreements made by the Four Powers cannot be considered obsolete because the Soviet Union has already obtained the full advantage therefrom and now wishes to deprive the other parties of their compensating advantages. These agreements are binding upon all of the signatories so long as they have not been replaced by others following free negotiations.

Insofar as the Potsdam Agreement is concerned, the status of Berlin does not depend upon that agreement. Moreover, it is the Soviet Union that bears responsibility for the fact that the Potsdam Agreement could not be implemented.

The Soviet memorandum purports formally to repudiate the agreements of September 12, 1944 and May 1, 1945. This repudiation in fact involves other and more recent engagements. We refer in this connection to the Four Power agreement of June 29, 1949 whereby, among other things, the Soviet Union assumed “an obligation” to assure the normal functioning of transport and communication between Berlin and the Western Zone of Germany. This “obligation” the Soviet Union now purports to shed. The United States also

refers to the “summit” agreement of July 23, 1955 whereby the Four Powers recognized “their common responsibility for the settlement of the German question”, a phrase which necessarily includes the problem of Berlin. Apparently the Soviet Union now attempts to free itself from these agreed responsibilities and obligations.

The United States Government cannot prevent the Soviet Government from announcing the termination of its own authority in the quadripartite regime in the sector which it occupies in the city of Berlin. On the other hand, the Government of the United States will not and does not, in any way, accept a unilateral denunciation of the accords of 1944 and 1945; nor is it prepared to relieve the Soviet Union from the obligations which it assumed in June 1949. Such action on the part of the Soviet Government would have no legal basis, since the agreements can only be terminated by mutual consent. The Government of the United States will continue to hold the Soviet Government directly responsible for the discharge of its obligations undertaken with respect to Berlin under existing agreements. As the Soviet Government knows, the French, British and United States Governments have the right to maintain garrisons in their sectors of Berlin and to have free access thereto. Certain administrative procedures have been agreed with the Soviet authorities accordingly and are in operation at the present time. The Government of the United States will not accept a unilateral repudiation on the part of the Soviet Government of its obligations in respect of that freedom of access. Nor will it accept the substitution of the regime which the Soviet Government refers to as the German Democratic Republic for the Soviet Government in this respect.

In the view of the Government of the United States, there can be no “threat” to the Soviet Government or the regime which the Soviet Government refers to as the German Democratic Republic from the presence of the French, British and United States garrisons in Berlin. Nor can there be any military threat from Berlin to the Soviet Government and this regime. The forces of the three Western Powers in Berlin number about ten thousand men. The Soviet Government, on the other hand, is said to maintain some three hundred and fifty thousand troops in Eastern Germany, while the regime which the Soviet Government refers to as the German Democratic Republic is understood also to maintain over two hundred thousand men under arms. In these circumstances, the fear that the Western troops in Berlin may “inflict harm” appears to be wholly unfounded. If Berlin has become a focus of international tension, it is because the Soviet Government has deliberately threatened to disturb the existing arrangements at present in force there, arrangements to which the Soviet Government is itself a party. The inhabitants of West Berlin have recently reaffirmed in a free vote their overwhelming approval and support for the existing status of that city.

The continued protection of the freedom of more than two million people of West Berlin is a right and responsibility solemnly accepted by the Three Western Powers. Thus the United States cannot consider any proposal which would have the effect of jeopardizing the freedom and security of these people. The rights of the Three Powers to remain in Berlin with unhindered communications by surface and air between that city and the Federal Republic of Germany are under existing conditions essential to the discharge of that right and responsibility. Hence the proposal for a so-called “free city” for West Berlin as put forward by the Soviet Union, is unacceptable.

As is stated in the Soviet Government’s note of November 27, it is certainly not normal that thirteen years after the end of the war there should still remain in a part of German territory a system of occupancy instituted in 1945. The United States deplors this fact and the fact that Germany has not yet been reunified so that Berlin might resume its rightful position as capital of a united Germany. If the treaty of peace, which alone can bring an end to this situation, has not been concluded with a reunited Germany, the responsibility in no way rests with the Three Western Powers which have not spared any effort to bring the Four Powers out of the impasse where they have so long found themselves. Pending the conclusion of a peace treaty, the present situation continues.

In reality, the form of government in Berlin, the validity of which the Soviet Government attempts to contest today, is only one aspect, and not the essential one, of the German problem in its entirety. This problem, which has often been defined, involves the well-known questions of reunification, European security, as well as a peace treaty. It has in the past been discussed without success in the course of numerous international meetings with the Soviets. The Government of the United States has always been and continues

today to be ready to discuss it. The United States made clear this readiness in its note to the Soviet Union of September 30, 1958, in which it was stated:

“The Government of the United States is ready at any time to enter into discussions with the Soviet Government on the basis of these proposals [i.e., the Western proposals for free all-German elections and free decisions for all-German Government], or of any other proposals genuinely designed to insure the reunification of Germany in freedom, in any appropriate forum. It regards the solution of the German problem as essential if a lasting settlement in Europe is to be achieved.” The Soviet Union has not yet seen fit to reply to this note.

Public repudiation of solemn engagements, formally entered into and repeatedly reaffirmed, coupled with an ultimatum threatening unilateral action to implement that repudiation unless it be acquiesced in within six months, would afford no reasonable basis for negotiation between sovereign states. The Government of the United States could not embark on discussions with the Soviet Union upon these questions under menace or ultimatum; indeed, if that were intended, the United States would be obliged immediately to raise a protest in the strongest terms. Hence, it is assumed that this is not the purpose of the Soviet note of November 27 and that the Soviet Government, like itself, is ready to enter into discussions in an atmosphere devoid of coercion or threats.

On this basis, the United States Government would be interested to learn whether the Soviet Government is ready to enter into discussions between the Four Powers concerned. In that event, it would be the object of the Government of the United States to discuss the question of Berlin in the wider framework of negotiations for a solution of the German problem as well as that of European security. The United States Government would welcome the views of the Soviet Government at an early date.