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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

27 March 1959

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Soviet and Other Reactions to Various US Courses of Action in the Berlin Crisis

THE PROBLEM

To estimate Soviet and other reactions to four US courses of action in the event of failure of negotiations in the Berlin crisis and Soviet interference with Western access. The courses of action are: (a) a substantial effort to reopen ground access to West Berlin by local action; (b) a substantial effort to reopen air access; (c) reprisals against the Communists in other areas; and (d) preparations for general war.

INTRODUCTION

1. The consequences of any US course of action on the international scene will always depend on the context of events

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within which the US makes its move, and on the manner, style, and timing of the action. In the present Berlin crisis there has already been extensive maneuver on both sides. The issues at stake have been defined in various ways, ranging from the relatively narrow question of Berlin's status to the wider problem of European and even of world security. Propaganda and diplomacy are continuously active. Neither side has finally defined its own position, while it tests as far as it may the strength and resolution of the adversary. Given the importance and dangers implicit in the whole complex of issues surrounding the Berlin problem, the mood and even the intentions of the protagonists may shift as the crisis is prolonged.

2. This being the situation, an estimate of the consequences of certain US courses of action in the Berlin crisis presents peculiar difficulties. It is impossible to predict the particular context of events within which these actions might be taken, and we think it important to point out that an estimate made without knowledge of this context might be seriously misleading. A US move made at a particular juncture of events, or executed

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in a particular manner, might have consequences altogether different from the same move made under different circumstances, or in a different manner. We have therefore not tried to make a detailed estimate, but instead have attempted to describe, in a general way, some of the limits within which we believe the consequences of US action would be likely to fall, and to explain some of the factors which would be likely to determine these consequences.

3. In particular, Soviet and free world reactions to the Western measures listed above would be influenced by the manner in which negotiations had failed as well as by the underlying reasons for this outcome. Much would depend upon whether the Soviet or Western side seemed to be responsible for the final breaking off of negotiations. If the whole chain of negotiations had been run through, and the breakdown occurred at the summit, international tension would be markedly greater than if it came at the ministerial level or lower. Incidents arising from harassment or interference with Allied traffic by Soviet or GDR authorities

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might have heightened tensions and influenced world opinion for or against one side or the other. Similar effects would result if either side had begun military preparations. Also, the skill with which the Western measures were justified to the world would influence both Soviet behavior and free world opinion.

4. It is clear that the whole array of circumstances prevailing when the courses of action under discussion are put into play cannot be known in advance. However, in order to narrow the range of uncertainty the following general factors, applying to all four cases, are assumed to be operative:

(a) At the time when negotiations break down the Western Powers will have made statements indicating that they intend to maintain their rights of unhampered access to Berlin by force if necessary. Their public posture will be such that resort to force will be clearly preparation implicit as a next step. Some/manifesting readiness for war will have been undertaken.

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(b) It is recognized that the Soviets and GDR will almost certainly not deny access to Berlin outright. Instead, they will simply be making access subject to certain conditions, beginning presumably with replacement of Soviet GDR controllers at checkpoints. Thus, the Western justification for resort to force will have to rest on the West's own determination that one or another requirement governing access is in effect a denial of access.

COURSE A: A substantial effort to reopen ground access by local action* -- defined as the dispatch of a reinforced US battalion, with forces up to a reinforced division with tactical air support in readiness if required. The force will proceed toward the opposite end of the autobahn taking over control points as required. The force will not fire unless fired upon but will deploy off the autobahn if necessary to meet the situation.

* See SNIE 100-2-59, especially Paragraphs 25 and 26, for an estimate of the Soviet reaction in this case.

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5. Once the Soviets were actually confronted with such a task force, they might estimate that to oppose it with force would set off a train of events which would end in general war. If they so concluded they would either seek the advantages of surprise and the initiative by launching a pre-emptive nuclear attack on North America, or they would decide not to oppose the Western force at all and, while appealing to world opinion and the UN, would abandon for the time being their effort to impose the conditions on access which had led to the Western action. We do not believe, however, that the appearance of a US force on the autobahn, without very extensive additional military and psychological preparations, would lead the Soviets to the conclusion that the US was willing to proceed to general war.

6. Instead, Moscow would probably estimate that the US lacked the military means to deal effectively on a local basis with the Soviet forces in the GDR, and that the US, rather than increase the scale of military involvement up to and including general war, would prefer to make concessions to the Soviet-demands

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on Berlin. We believe, therefore, that the most likely Soviet response would be to resist the US division with force. Soviet resistance would be aimed at driving the invader from GDR soil while minimizing the risk of expanding hostilities.

7. In this action Moscow could limit itself to use of the East German Army. This would have the advantage of avoiding a direct confrontation between Soviet and Western forces, and it would lend plausibility to the claim of the GDR to sovereignty and independence. On the other hand, there would be definite risks in the use of East German forces. The political reliability of some of these troops may be regarded by the Soviets as uncertain and they might fear the possibility of defection among them. If the East Germans suffered a defeat or a large-scale defection, there might be flash risings in the GDR and the possibility of these spreading to Poland or Hungary, or both. We believe that the Soviets might attempt initially to use East German forces for setting up road blocks and other obstructive action, but that once fighting had broken out they would feel obliged to use their own forces along with East Germans.

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8. In the greater part of the non-Communist world there would almost certainly be a strongly adverse reaction to a substantial Western effort to reopen ground access to Berlin by local action. This reaction would stem primarily from fear of war, and from disapproval of the Western resort to armed force. In the more important countries of NATO, public reaction would probably be mixed, and would depend to some degree on how far Soviet obstructive actions appeared designed merely to enforce technical requirements for GDR supervision of Western access to Berlin, rather than to isolate Berlin from the West and communize the city. If the latter case were established there would be considerable public support for the Western countermove. Should the Western troops succeed in opening the road without violating adjacent GDR territory, the action would probably be generally approved, but should there be fighting in which Western troops deployed widely, many even in Western countries would believe that the West had initiated aggression.

9. We believe that most of the NATO governments would support the US move, providing they were convinced that the issue

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at stake clearly exceeded a mere technicality. Most other governments, however, and especially those of neutralist countries, would oppose. The matter would almost certainly be raised in the UN. Once in the UN General Assembly (assuming that the Security Council could not act), a resolution might be passed calling for a withdrawal of forces. This might have the effect of conceding nominal East German control of Western access to Berlin.

COURSE B: A substantial effort to reopen air access -- Western action would be graduated depending upon the degree of Soviet and GDR interference. If there is harassment (e.g., barrage balloons) which endangers the safety of Western aircraft peaceably transiting the corridor, Western combat aircraft will enter the corridors to come to their assistance.

10. We believe that the USSR would probably refrain from attacks on Western aircraft with fighters and antiaircraft fire, inasmuch as the USSR would thereby appear before the world as the initiator of hostilities which could lead to general war. The Soviets

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might attempt to interfere with Western aircraft by less direct means: "accidents" might occur and there would probably be ECM interference. Western aircraft might be fired on, however, if they flew outside of the air corridors. The main Soviet reaction would be directed to political exploitation of this situation, especially in the UN. The Soviets would calculate that the Western action could not be sustained for a long period without seriously adverse political effects, even in the Western countries.

11. The extent to which the protection of Western air traffic would be condemned or approved by free world opinion would depend in large part on what provocation the USSR had given, that is, on how specific its threats to air traffic had been. Also, far wider approval would be found for this action if the Communists were simultaneously attempting to deny all ground access. Even so, the fact that the US had resorted to military action would tend to alienate some sections of world public opinion.

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COURSE C: Reprisals against the Communists in the form of tripartite naval controls on Soviet Bloc merchant shipping --

Delays will be imposed for inspection of documents, cargo and health conditions, or search for illegally carried personnel. This will be done in parts and on the high seas. Execution will be by US, British, and French naval forces. Collaboration of other countries in their ports and national waters will be sought.

12. The Soviets would reason that the effects of such an interruption on the Bloc economy would not be immediate, and that these need not therefore determine their short-term actions in the Berlin crisis. They would probably not therefore desist immediately from whatever interference they had imposed on access to Berlin. They would seek to make maximum propaganda capital out of the Western action, warning that it had brought international tension to a new height and was, in fact, virtually an act of war. They would undertake whatever legal recourse was open to them in international forums including the UN. They would probably take similar reprisals against the shipping of the three powers in Bloc ports and national waters.

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enlisting the collaboration of other states if they could. They might also attempt to detain or take custody of merchant shipping on the high seas near to their own coasts and ports. Finally, they might declare certain waters, such as the Black and Baltic seas, closed to ships of the three powers.

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13. Free world reaction/such restrictions on Bloc trade would probably be generally adverse. Such measures would be viewed as exclusively retaliatory actions which did not contribute to negotiation and settlement of the questions at issue, although they would probably win far wider support if they came at a time when West Berlin was under full blockade. Those NATO powers which carry on substantial seaborne trade with the Bloc would be most reluctant to accept the sacrifices entailed in the interruption of that trade. Free world opinion generally would be inclined to regard such reprisals as leading to a further deterioration of East-West relations.

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COURSE D: Preparations for general war.-- Measures of partial mobilization to be taken would include unit deployments, increased emphasis on readiness of units, on increased alert posture, and heightened civil defense activity. Public awareness of these activities is assumed.

14. The extent to which these measures were effective in convincing the Soviet leaders that the West was determined to go to war over interference with its rights of access to Berlin would depend less on these measures themselves than on what was said concerning them. The Soviets would probably be convinced of the Western intention actually to go to war only if the measures were explained to the Western publics as having that meaning. If the USSR was convinced that the West was prepared to wage general war rather than permit the loss of its rights in Berlin, the Soviet leaders would almost certainly reach a negotiated settlement which respected basic Western interests. They would still come to this, however, only by a series of steps in negotiation, hoping that the gradual easing of their position would weaken Western resolve and unity and permit the USSR to avoid the appearance of backing down abruptly.

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15. If the military preparations indicated were accompanied by credible statements by the highest leaders that the Western Powers intended to go to general war over the Berlin issue, there would probably be widespread alarm and dismay among the people of the Atlantic community and profound disapproval in most of the rest of the world. There would be demands in the UN for action to halt the trend toward war. Yet these would not necessarily be the permanent or decisive reactions. To the extent to which NATO countries recognized that the issue posed over Berlin really involved the defense of the free world, we believe that public opinion would accept the Western measures with firmness and resignation. This would be especially true if it were widely believed that large-scale military preparations held good promise of maintaining the essential Western position without actual resort to war. We cannot judge at this time whether such reactions would be likely to outweigh those of fear and opposition.

16. If military preparations and declarations of intent to go to general war had not produced a shift in the Soviet

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position and the Western Powers then issued an ultimatum demanding a redress of grievances, say within 24 hours, it seems to us impossible to predict the Soviet response with assurance. Confronted with such a public, clear-cut, and uncompromising challenge, the USSR would consider its prestige as a great power with its prestige at stake and would surely find it very difficult to back down. If the Soviet leaders considered their forces to be in an adequate state of readiness they might unleash a pre-emptive attack. Alternatively, they might make the concessions demanded. We consider the latter course the more likely, but we do not believe that the Western Powers could act with confidence on this assumption.

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