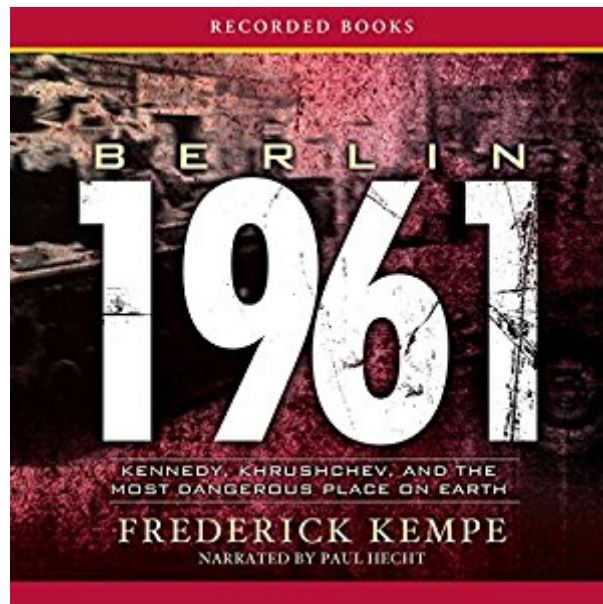


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Berlin 1961: Kennedy, Khrushchev, And The Most Dangerous Place On Earth



Synopsis

A former Wall Street Journal editor and the current president and CEO of the Atlantic Council, Frederick Kempe draws on recently released documents and personal interviews to re-create the powder keg that was 1961 Berlin. In Cold War Berlin, the United States and the Soviet Union stand nose to nose, with the possibility of nuclear war just one misstep away.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Longtime journalist Frederick Kempe has turned the old saw about journalism being the first draft of history on its head - he has written an impressive historical account that reads like today's newspaper. Drawing on newly declassified archival material, Kempe has recreated in unprecedented fashion one of the most pivotal moments in postwar history - the building of Berlin Wall in August 1961. A wealth of American, German and Russian documents - diplomatic cables, transcripts, memoranda, letters - provided the author with rich source material. What makes the book such a compelling read, however, is Kempe's skill in extracting the drama, the telling detail, and the colorful quote from this archival material. Kempe, whose previous books include a personal account of his descent from German immigrants and the narrative of a trip through Siberia, is an accomplished storyteller, and he grips the reader with his opening accounts of Nikita Krushchev's mercurial character and doesn't let go. He casts the building of the Berlin Wall as a pas de deux between the embattled Soviet leader and a youthful and inexperienced President Kennedy. The author documents step by step how miscues in the Kennedy administration led to the blunder of the Wall

being built and becoming the symbol and mainstay of an escalated Cold War. It was Kennedy's impotence in the face of this master-stroke of communist brazenness, Kempe argues, that emboldened the Soviets to send missiles to Cuba and led to the famous confrontation between Kennedy and Krushchev in the following year. Kempe's account adds a depth and context to this key historical moment that enhances the reader's understanding of European and Russian relations today, whether the Wall is something you remember or learned from history books. It is not revisionist - most historians would agree that a year which saw the Bay of Pigs and the failed Vienna summit was already a disaster for Kennedy before the Wall went up on August 13. But Kempe documents how the best and the brightest failed to heed a hoary Dean Acheson, Truman's secretary of state, or a youthful Henry Kissinger, then an ambitious Harvard professor, to take a harder line against Soviet aggression. And Kempe makes it all seem like it happened yesterday. His vivid descriptions of the personalities make them come alive on the page. His authoritative familiarity with both the big players and the small players allows the drama to come across. It seems like a time when titans walked the earth, as in a White House meeting of Soviet experts in February that brought together JFK, Lyndon Johnson, Dean Rusk, McGeorge Bundy, George Kennan, and Averell Harriman, among others. On the opposing side, the portraits of Krushchev and East German leaders Walter Ulbricht and Erich Honecker show how formidable the challenge was facing the administration. The centerpiece of Kempe's account is the actual operation to seal off West Berlin in one daring maneuver executed in the middle of the night on a single day in August. The Soviet and East German officials planned and executed a monumental task of erecting concrete and barbed wire barriers around the Western enclave without tipping their hand either to intelligence agencies, the media or an unsuspecting German public. The open borders in Berlin, thought to be guaranteed by the postwar four-power agreements, were allowing an unsustainable flow of refugees from the peasant and workers' paradise of the German Democratic Republic to the capitalistic and prosperous Federal Republic. The ever greater number of refugees threatened the collapse of the East German economy and the unraveling of the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe. And so Ulbricht and Kruschev concocted the plan of building a Wall, willing to brave the flagrant violation of postwar treaties and the horrible publicity of imprisoning their own citizens in order to preserve their regime. Kempe details the military precision of the operation, from the stockpiling of material, including hundreds of tons of barbed wire, to the top secret envelopes handed to military commanders on the eve of the operation itself. Kempe has marvelous details, like that fact that Honecker bought the barbed wire from West German and British suppliers and then removed and destroyed the labels showing the provenance in order to avoid a political backlash. Kempe, the

former editor and publisher of The Wall Street Journal Europe, recounts the story of the lone Reuters correspondent stationed in East Berlin, who had a source tell him on Friday, August 11, "If I were you, and were planning to leave Berlin this weekend, I would not do so." Reuters was thus alone in providing the world with some small foreshadowing that something was afoot. The legendary broadcast journalist Edward R. Murrow, in his capacity as director of the U.S. Information Service, just happened to be in Berlin that weekend. Murrow, Kempe relates, toured a despairing East Berlin on that fateful Sunday after the barbed wire shut off all exit routes and "doubted whether his friend Kennedy understood the seriousness of the situation that had been spawned by his inaction." Murrow cabled Kennedy that evening, predicting that the crisis would undermine confidence in the U.S. far beyond Berlin itself. "What is in danger of being destroyed here is that perishable quality called hope," Murrow wrote perceptively and poignantly. The iconic moments are here - the East German border guard throwing aside his rifle and leaping across the barbed wire to freedom, Kennedy announcing to throngs assembled before the Berlin city hall, "Ich bin ein Berliner" - but the beauty of this tale are the many hitherto unknown or unappreciated details, the background that tells us why this action of building a Wall in the middle of Berlin prolonged the Cold War for another three decades. Kempe, who now as chief executive of the Atlantic Council of the United States is in the thick of transatlantic policymaking, has succeeded brilliantly in recreating the drama of one of the most important moments in U.S.-European relations. Beyond its relevance to today's issues in transatlantic relations, his portrayal of political miscalculations in the fog of epoch-making events is truly cautionary given the critical global situations we face today.

Frederick Kempe tells us the story of the Berlin crisis of 1961. It's as if he was a fly on the wall that was privy to all the insiders' thoughts, fears and doubts during the most volatile time of the Cold War. East Berlin during this time still had bombed out buildings and shrapnel pocked structures. The inhabitants of East Berlin lived in the veil of the grayness of Communism. In West Berlin the economy was thriving with new buildings and a renewed infrastructure as the sunshine of democracy showed the vivid colors of freedom. The basic problem stemmed from the fact that East Germany was losing thousands of people that were crossing over to West Berlin and not coming back. In essence it was becoming an economic disaster for East Germany. As a young infantry second lieutenant, nine years after the time Mr. Kempe writes about, I saw the vivid contrasts of East and West Berlin. I went through Checkpoint Charlie followed by the East German police and entered into the grayness of a Communist state. In returning to West Berlin the full color palate returned. I'm sure the nine years since the wall was constructed that East Berlin had changed very

little from what I saw in my three visits there. Kempe goes into great detail in telling the stories of intrigue from both the perspectives of the Communists and Khrushchev's strategies to the American side led by a young and inexperienced President Kennedy. The author carefully sets the scene of the confrontation. He gives a complete background to all the key players from both sides of the spectrum. He shows the purpose and also the misconceptions of the leaders and analysts. The show of America's lack of intelligence as it was shown completely surprised by the quick construction of the Berlin Wall was detailed by the author. Kempe shows a vulnerable Kennedy full of doubt and indecision. He also shows Khrushchev as an aggressive alpha male shrewd in international politics. Also Mr. Kempe brings into play the actions of the new and the old. The new was the actions of Dr. Henry Kissinger and his advice given to Kennedy. The old were the actions of Dean Acheson and retired General Clay. He shows the insight of old "Cold Warriors" in trying to help Kennedy in this crisis. Also it shows the talents of Kissinger as it will play out in his rise to power in international politics. The perception of Kennedy's youth and vigor along with the impression of his intellectual political savvy is shown as an illusion by Kempe. The author shows us in no uncertain terms the unvarnished truth of what really happened. This is not a historical book based on the jingoism as penned during the Cold War. This book is an honest eye opening account which marks the high-water mark of that forty three year period known as the Cold War. The work is a well researched book of a complex time. Well done!

This should have been a terrific book. Instead, it is hamstrung by excessively poor editing and factual errors. It's author - Frederick Kempe - himself a former reporter and editor, has sought to tell the story of Berlin in 1961 in a narrative, feature-journalism sort of style. But all too often sentences are cramped and convoluted, necessitating two or even three readings to get their meaning straight. The many editorial errors are glaring. Lines like "Arizona senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona applauded enthusiastically . . ." (pages 65-66) and the substitution of the word "Berlin" for "Bissell" (CIA director of plans Richard Bissell) (page 173) leave this reader shaking his head in dismay. More disheartening are the sorts of obvious factual errors that, unfortunately, call into question Mr. Kempe's credentials as a historian. For example, on page 181 we read in reference to Berlin's Frankfurter Strasse, "During World War II's final days, Soviet soldiers had hung Nazis from trees that lined the street, often fastening to their corpses identifying papers with the inscription: HERE HANGS SO-AND-SO, BECAUSE HE REFUSED TO DEFEND WIFE AND CHILD." It was, of course, the Nazis themselves who hung their own comrades, not the Soviets. Likewise, the map depicting the Berlin Wall inside the book's front and back covers is inaccurately drawn, and places

the Brandenburg Gate - that single most important German nation-defining monument - as being in the Western Sector, and not in the Eastern Sector, where indeed it was. All in all, a disappointment.

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