

## Jeffrey G. Giauque, *International History Review*, September 2002

Building on his previous work on the German question and the cold war, Rolf Steininger seeks to provide a work of synthesis on the second Berlin crisis of 1958-63. In many ways, this study is a follow-up to a Steininger's best-known book, *Eine vertane Chance: die Stalin-Note vom 10. März 1952 und die Wiedervereinigung: eine Studie auf der Grundlage unveröffentlichter britischer und amerikanischer Akten* (1985), which appeared in English in 1990 under the title *The German Question: The Stalin Note of 1952 and the Problem of Reunification*. In the earlier book, Steininger criticized the government of Konrad Adenauer and its Western allies for what he viewed as their failure to take seriously Joseph Stalin's dubious offer in 1952 to reunify Germany on the basis of neutrality. Now, a decade after actual reunification has vindicated Adenauer's course in the eyes of many, Steininger narrates the events that led up to, and followed, the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961.

The second Berlin crisis began in November 1958 when Nikita Khrushchev announced that he would sign a treaty with East Germany ending the rights of occupation of the Western powers in the divided city if the latter did not renegotiate those rights with East Germany within six months. Because the Western powers refused to recognize the government in East Berlin as anything other than a Soviet puppet, they were confronted with the dilemma of dealing with the government, and thereby according it at least de facto recognition, or the prospect that the Soviets and East Germans might seal the access routes to West Berlin as they had during the first cold war crisis over the city in 1948-9. Some historians view Khrushchev as acting for defensive purposes, seeking either to prop up East Germany (the GDR) or to prevent West Germany (the FRG) from acquiring nuclear weapons, while others believe that the Soviet leader sought to absorb West Berlin into the GDR and deal a symbolic defeat to the West. Steininger discusses these debates, but fails to resolve any of them. When writing on the Eastern side of the story, he generally relies on secondary sources and offers little that is new.

Although nominally an overview of the Berlin crisis, Steininger's book is really about the US and British responses to Khrushchev's challenge. He demonstrates convincingly that the administrations of both Dwight D. Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy had anticipated that the Soviet and East German authorities might one day seal the border between East and West Berlin in order to stem the tide of refugees fleeing the GDR. In both internal studies and comments to their allies, US leaders had frequently stated that while the presence of allied troops in West Berlin and the viability of the western half of the city were concerns for which the United States was prepared to go to war, the fate of the eastern half of the city, and of East Germany as a whole, was not a US priority. Thus, Steininger argues that in Kennedy's famous speech at the Berlin Wall in 1963, the president should have said: "Ich bin ein *West* Berliner."

Steininger examines the roles of the other major actors in the crisis, but in much less detail. Because the United States had made its position on Berlin clear on so many occasions, German leaders should not have been surprised, in August 1961, when their allies did nothing to halt the construction of the wall. Steininger views West Germany's inability to

grasp the US position as part of a wider failure of the Adenauer government to take the initiative with either its allies or the Soviets on issues relating to the division of the country. Instead, the West German government clung to the status quo and joined Charles de Gaulle in attempting to obstruct East-West dialogue. Steininger suggests that Adenauer was paralysed, on the one hand, by fear of any change and, on the other hand, by concern that intransigence might lead to a new war that would devastate both German states. However, Steininger saves his most bitter criticism for the British. He shows that Harold Macmillan's Conservative government was prepared to surrender on almost all of Khrushchev's demands from the beginning. Noting that Macmillan was prepared to recognize East Germany, turn West Berlin into a "free city", and keep Germany divided forever, Steininger refers to Macmillan as Khrushchev's "closest ally" ("beste Verbündete"). Ultimately, despite his many criticisms of US policy, Steininger concludes that because the building of the wall froze the Status quo in Germany, it amounted to a victory for the West, as it had been Khrushchev who had sought to overturn the balance throughout the crisis.