

The Berlin Situation

THE Soviet Premier, Nikita Khrushchev, has referred to West Berlin as "a cancerous growth" and "a bone in the throat". The subversive activities allegedly based in Berlin have been a favourite target for Soviet propaganda for years. What really seems to upset the Soviet authorities, however, is the existence, one hundred miles behind the "Iron Curtain", of a thriving community of more than two million free people who are determined to remain a part of the Western democratic world. Virtually all visitors to Berlin comment on the comparison between the bustle, bright lights and handsome modern architecture of the Western sector with the emptiness and dowdiness of East Berlin. West Berlin is a constant reminder to the masses in East Germany that life on the other side of the "Iron Curtain" is freer, easier and brighter.

West Berlin also provides the escape route for over half of the more than 200,000 East Germans who flee westward each year from the German Democratic Republic (GDR). The Soviet authorities are now making an all-out effort to build up the East German economy, and the constant loss of skilled technicians and craftsmen to the West is an increasing embarrassment. The continued existence of West Berlin as a community allied to the West is thus a serious hindrance to the carrying out of Soviet plans for East Germany.

Nevertheless, there had been no major attempt to alter the *status quo* in Berlin since the Soviet blockade of Berlin in 1949*. In accordance with agreements effected before the end of the war, and confirmed in 1949, Berlin is still occupied by garrisons from the Soviet Union, the United States, the United Kingdom and France; also by agreement, the Western powers have the use of air, road and rail routes through the Soviet Zone from West Germany to Berlin. The whole of Berlin, indeed the whole of Germany, was to have been administered as a single unit, but from the start the Soviet occupying authorities sought to impose their own economic and political system on their zone of occupation and to prevent normal relations between the zones. At the time that the Federal Republic of Germany was being established in the Western Zones, and the so-called German Democratic Republic (GDR) in the East, the Soviet Union instituted a blockade of Berlin in order to force its absorption into the surrounding Soviet Zone. The success of the allied airlift in defeating the blockade, and the determination of the West Berliners, were the major factors in persuading the Soviets to leave West Berlin substantially alone during the following decade.

In a public speech on November 10, 1958, Khrushchev announced that the Soviet Union would hand over to the GDR those functions relating to Berlin which are still exercised by Soviet organs. He accused the United States, the United Kingdom and France of turning West Berlin into a centre of subversive activity against the Communist Bloc, and said that in future these powers must undertake their own relations with the GDR if they are interested in Berlin. This seemed an obvious attempt to force the Western powers to recognize the GDR which, thus far, only the Communist Bloc and Yugoslavia have done. It indicated the probability of further steps to force the Western garrisons out of Berlin.

*See "External Affairs", June and August 1949.