

Berlin Blockade

Post-war Division of Germany

The Berlin Blockade, one of the first major crises of the Cold War, occurred from June 24, 1948 to May 11, 1949 when the Soviet Union blocked railroad and street access to West Berlin. The crisis abated after the Soviet Union did not act to stop American, British and French airlifts of food and other provisions to the Western-held sectors of Berlin following the Soviet blockade; referred to as Operation Vittles. The Berlin Blockade was one of the largest blockades in history.

When World War II ended in Europe on May 8, 1945, Soviet and Western (U.S., British, and French) troops were located in random places, essentially, along a line in the centre of Europe. From July 17 to August 2, 1945, the victorious Allied Powers reached the Potsdam Agreement on the fate of post-war Europe, calling for the division of a defeated Germany into four occupation zones (thus reaffirming principles laid out earlier by the Yalta Conference), and the similar division of Berlin into four zones, later called East Berlin and West Berlin. The French, U.S., and British sectors of Berlin were deep within the Soviet occupation zone, and thus a focal point of tensions corresponding to the breakdown of the Western-Soviet wartime alliance.

The Dispute over Berlin

The Soviets pushed the Allied for reparations from West Germany's industrial plants, though this had not been agreed to. Predictably, Harry S. Truman refused to give the Soviet Union reparations; Joseph Stalin responded by splitting off the Soviet sector of Germany as a Communist state.

On June 18, 1948, the three Western sectors promulgated the laws, coming into force on June 20, that ended the use of occupation currency and introduced the Deutsche Mark, as a way of putting pressure on Stalin for the reunification of Germany and to spur the German reconstruction. The Soviets objected to this move. Having been invaded twice by Germany in the preceding three decades, they wanted Germany demilitarized like Japan before a reunification should take place. The Soviets also considered this move a breach of agreements reached at the 1945 Potsdam Conference, which stated that Germany would be treated as one economic unit.

The Berlin Airlift

On June 24, 1948, the Soviet Union blocked access to the three Western-held sectors of Berlin, which lay deep within the Soviet-controlled zone of Germany, by cutting off all rail and road routes going through Soviet-controlled territory in Germany. The Western powers had never negotiated a pact with the Soviets guaranteeing these rights. Amid the fallout of the London Conference, the Soviets now rejected arguments that occupation rights in Berlin and the use of the routes during the previous three years had given the West legal claim to unimpeded use of the highways and railroads. As a further means of applying pressure, the Western sectors of Berlin were isolated from the city power grid, depriving the inhabitants of domestic and industrial electricity supplies.

The commander of the American occupation zone in Germany, General Lucius D. Clay, proposed sending a large armoured column driving peacefully, as a moral right, down the Autobahn from West Germany to West Berlin, but prepared to defend itself if it were stopped or attacked. President Harry S. Truman, however, following the consensus in Washington, believed this entailed an unacceptable risk of war, in which the U.S. might be unpopular. Clay was told to take advice from General Curtis LeMay, commander of United States Air Forces in Europe, to see if an airlift was possible.

By chance, General Albert Wedemeyer, the U.S. Army Chief of Plans and Operations, was in Europe on an inspection tour when the crisis occurred. He had been commander of the U.S. China Theater in 1944–1945 and had an intimate knowledge of the World War II Allied airlift from India over the Hump of the Himalayas. He was in favour of the airlift option and knew the best person to run the operation: Lt. General William H. Tunner was charged with organizing and commanding the Berlin airlift because of his experience in commanding and organising the airlift over the Hump.

Berlin Airlift Monument in Berlin-Tempelhof, displaying the names of the 39 British and 31 U.S.-American pilots who lost their lives during the operation. Similar monuments can be found at the military airfield Wietzenbruch near Celle and at Rhein-Main Air Base.

On June 25 Clay gave the order to launch a massive airlift (ultimately lasting 462 days) that flew supplies into the Western-held sectors of Berlin over the blockade during 1948–1949. The first airplane flew on the following day, and the first British airplane flew on the 28th. This aerial supplying of West Berlin became known as the Berlin Airlift. Military confrontation loomed while Truman embarked on a highly visible move which would publicly humiliate the Soviets.

The U.S. action was given the name **Operation Vittles**. An existing British supply plan known as *Knicker* evolved into 'Carter Paterson', and then became Operation *Plainfare* in early July 1948.

Hundreds of aircraft, nicknamed *Rosinenbomber* ("raisin bombers") by the local population, were used to fly in a wide variety of cargo items, including more than 1.5 million tons of coal. At the height of the operation, on April 16, 1949, an allied aircraft landed in Berlin every minute, and 12,840 tons of freight were delivered. The containers ranged from large containers to small packets of candy with tiny individual parachutes intended for the children of Berlin. Sick children were evacuated on return flights as well. The aircraft were supplied and flown by the United States, United Kingdom and France, but pilots and crew also came from Australia, Canada, South Africa and New Zealand in order to assist the supply of Berlin. Ultimately 278,228 flights were made and 2,326,406 tons of food and supplies were delivered to Berlin. On April 4, 1949, the Western powers signed the North Atlantic Treaty founding NATO, declaring that an attack on any one would be considered an attack against them all.

The USSR lifted its blockade at 23:59, on May 11, 1949. However, the airlift did not end until September 30, as the Western nations wanted to build up sufficient amounts of supplies in West Berlin in case the Soviets blockaded it again.

The major Berlin airfields involved were Tempelhof in the American Sector, Gatow and the Havel river in the British and Tegel (built by army engineers in 49 days with the help of Berlin volunteers) in the French. Operational control of the three allied airlift corridors was given to Berlin Air Route Traffic Control Center (BARTCC), located at Tempelhof. Tensions in the Berlin Air Safety Center (BASC) – a four-

power organization manned by personnel from France, Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union – reached an understandable high during the Airlift, though the success of the campaign was in large part due to the coordination carried out within the BASC.

The Allied commander during the airlift was General Lucius D. Clay. He would return to Berlin during the second Berlin crisis, leading up to the building of the Berlin Wall and the Checkpoint Charlie crisis.

British Operation

Initially the British had about 150 C-47 Dakotas and 40 Avro Yorks. By July 18, the RAF was flying 995 tons of supplies per day into Berlin. In July, the Dakotas and Yorks were joined by 10 Short Sunderland and 2 Short Hythe flying boats, flying from the Elbe near Hamburg to the Havel river. The flying boats' speciality was transporting bulk salt, which would have been corrosive to the other planes. In November, Handley Page Hastings were added to the fleet and some crews and aircraft were removed to train others. By mid-December, the RAF had landed 100,000 tons of supplies. In April 1949, civilian companies involved in the airlift were formed into a Civil Airlift Division (of British European Airways) to operate under RAF control. By mid-April, the combined airlift of all nations operations managed to make 1,398 flights in 24 hours, carrying 12,940 tons (13,160 t) of goods, coal and machinery, beating their record of 8,246 (8,385 t) set only days earlier.