

TIMES PAST  
**1948 THE BERLIN AIRLIFT**

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**IN ONE OF THE FIRST CONFRONTATIONS OF THE COLD WAR, THE U.S. BEGAN A YEARLONG AIRLIFT OF FOOD AND AID TO WEST BERLIN AFTER THE SOVIET UNION BLOCKADED THE CITY**

"An iron curtain has descended across the continent," Winston Churchill declared in 1946. Behind that curtain, the former British Prime Minister said, East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Yugoslavia, and the other nations of Central and Eastern Europe had come under the control of the Soviet Union and its ruthless dictator, Joseph Stalin.

At the time, "iron curtain" was just a metaphor, but two years later, in June 1948, it became a reality when the Soviets literally tried to cut off West Berlin-located deep within Communist East Germany-with a blockade designed to starve the city into submission.

The blockade was an early and dangerous provocation of the Cold War, which pitted the United States and its allies against the Soviet Union for 40 years after the end of World War II.

During the war, the U.S. and the Soviets were on the same side, with Great Britain and France, in the fight against Hitler's Germany. But even before Germany's surrender in April 1945, the conflict between what would become the two postwar superpowers was taking shape: Washington wanted to limit the Soviet Union's territorial gains in Europe, and the Soviets wanted to extend Communist rule and build a buffer against future attacks from Germany and the West.

At the Potsdam Conference outside Berlin in July 1945, the Allies divided Germany into four occupation zones: The American, British, and French zones would ultimately constitute West Germany, a democratic republic; the Soviets established a socialist state in their zone, which became East Germany.

Berlin, which had been Germany's capital, was deep inside East Germany, more than 100 miles from the West German border. And like Germany itself, the city was divided into a free western half controlled by the U.S., Britain, and France, and a Soviet-controlled eastern half.

Germany was in ruins, and initially, all the wartime allies wanted to punish Germany for the war and for Nazi atrocities. They also wanted to make sure that Germany would never wage war in Europe again. The Soviet Union, which suffered enormous destruction and millions of deaths at the hands of the invading Nazis, was particularly concerned with Germany's "pacification."

But to enlist the West Germans as allies against the spread of Communism in Europe, the U.S. ultimately decided that it had to help rebuild Germany (along with the rest of Western Europe in a multi-billion-dollar effort known as the Marshall Plan).

Compassion for the German people was one reason, but American self-interest was another: President Harry S. Truman realized that starving West Germans might be more concerned with food, shelter, and jobs than with political freedom.

"There is no choice between being a Communist on 1,500 calories a day, and a believer in democracy on a thousand," said General Lucius Clay, who was in charge of the American occupation zone.

## WEST BERLIN'S LIFELINE

So the U.S. and its Allies helped rebuild a "stable and productive" Germany. Food and fuel, rather than bombs, became a Cold War weapon.

West Berlin, marooned in the middle of East Germany, needed special attention, and a steady stream of convoys from West Germany supplied it with food, fuel, and other staples. It was a thorn in the side for the Soviets, who saw West Berlin as an outpost for American spies and propaganda, and a tempting sanctuary for thousands of refugees escaping from oppression in East Germany and other Soviet satellites.

In 1948, the Soviets decided to challenge the U.S. and see how far it would go to defend the new status quo in Europe: On June 12, they closed the main road, or Autobahn, to Berlin for "repairs." By June 24, all road, river barge, and rail traffic had been halted, leaving West Berlin with about a month's supply of food and coal. In attempting to make the American, British, and French occupation untenable, the Soviets hoped to gain control over the entire city by making West Berlin dependent on Soviet and East German supplies.

"What happens to Berlin, happens to Germany" said Vyacheslav M. Molotov, the Soviet Foreign Minister. "What happens to Germany, happens to Europe."

General Clay reached the same conclusion. Although the Americans, British, and French were heavily outnumbered militarily, Clay declared: "Our remaining in Berlin is essential to our prestige in Germany and in Europe."

But how? Many of President Truman's advisers wanted him to abandon Berlin. Was it worth risking confrontation with the Soviets-and possibly starting World War III-to reopen the land and rail routes that had kept West Berlin free? Instead, the Americans and the British decided to build an "airbridge."

On June 26, 32 planes took off from West Germany with 80 tons of cargo bound for West Berlin. Within a month, 1,500 flights a day by more than 200 planes were delivering 4,500 tons of food, fuel, and other supplies to Tempelhof Airport in the besieged city.

Among the pilots was **Gail Halvorsen**, a 28-year-old Air Force lieutenant from Utah, who was christened the "Candy Bomber": After wiggling the wings on his C-54e as he headed in for a landing, he showered the city's children with candy, raisins, and gum in parachutes made from handkerchiefs.

The Soviets retaliated with various forms of harassment-jamming radio frequencies, for example-but were unwilling to risk a full-scale war to stop the airlift. Within a few months, Allied planes were ferrying in even more supplies than Berliners had received before the blockade.

Eleven months later, on May 12, 1949, the Soviets gave up and lifted the blockade. But the airlift continued through September to build up stockpiles, just in case. In all, American and British planes had flown 278,000 missions to Berlin and delivered more than 2 million tons of cargo. Thirty-nine British airmen and 31 Americans were among the 101 who died during the airlift, mostly as a result of plane crashes.

## THE WALL

While the airlift demonstrated Allied resolve in Europe and delivered a humbling rebuff to the Soviets, relations between East and West Germany (and Moscow and Washington) worsened in the 1950s, with Berlin a constant source of tension.

For the Soviets and East Germans, Berlin continued to be an embarrassing escape route from Communism's "worker's paradise." By the early 1960s, more than 2 million of East Germany's 17 million people had fled, and the country's Soviet-subsidized economy was in danger of collapse.

On Aug. 13, 1961, that escape route was closed, as Berliners awoke to find East German and Soviet troops building a wall through the heart of the city to encircle West Berlin.

The 103-mile-long concrete wall, topped with barbed wire, divided families and cost East Berliners their jobs in the Western zone. It also cost hundreds of lives over the years, as East German border guards carried out "shoot to kill" orders for any escape attempts to the West.

Two years after the Wall went up, in June 1963, President John F. Kennedy visited West Berlin and proclaimed: "Ich bin ein Berliner" "I am a Berliner" - in a display of solidarity with America's West German allies.

By 1987, with Communism on the verge of collapse across Eastern Europe, President Ronald Reagan stood before the Wall in West Berlin to deliver an unambiguous challenge to Soviet Secretary General Mikhail S. Gorbachev: "If you seek peace, if you seek prosperity for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, if you seek liberalization, come here to this gate. Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate. Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall."

Gorbachev didn't tear down the Wall, but he didn't stand in the way either when the East German government, in response to mass protests across the country, announced on Nov. 9, 1989, that East Berliners would be allowed to leave. Thousands swarmed the checkpoints, and soon took axes to the Wall itself.

"Virtually nobody predicted the fall of the Berlin Wall, and apparently nobody planned it," Roger Cohen wrote 10 years later in *The Times*. "As a result, two German states with utterly divergent ideologies and cultures found themselves propelled toward union."

#### AN EERIE REMINDER

In 1990, the two Germanys reunified. Two decades later, despite lingering economic disparities that still divide the eastern and western halves of the nation, Germany has the most people and the most robust economy of any country in the European Union.

Germany, Europe, and Washington's relationships with Moscow have taken many twists and turns in the last 60 years. And just last month, Russia invaded neighboring Georgia, a U.S. ally (see p. 6). That's why when Washington decided to airlift food and humanitarian aid to displaced Georgians, it was an eerie reminder that the Cold War was not so long ago.

#### LESSON PLAN 4

##### CRITICAL THINKING

Divide the class in half by taping a line down the center of the room. Designate one half as being ruled by a democratic government and the other as being ruled by a Communist government.

- \* What differences exist between the democratic and Communist societies?
- \* How might life -politically, economically, and socially -differ on each side?
- \* If the line dividing the classroom becomes a heavily guarded wall, how might life on either side change?
- \* How might people on one side of the wall think of those on the other side?

Korea was also divided into a Communist and a non-Communist country after World War II, and is still divided. What comparisons can students draw to Germany?

##### WRITING PROMPT

Based on the information in the article, write an essay explaining why you think Soviet Communism failed in Europe, despite Moscow's military might.

##### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Define the term "Cold War." What prompted the Cold war between the Soviet Union and the U.S. after World War II, after they had been allies in the war?

Why didn't the U.S. and the Soviet Union initially want to revive Germany after World War II? How did the food supplied by the Berlin Airlift become a Cold War weapon?

What did the Berlin Airlift symbolize in terms of Western commitment and resolve?

How might Americans have reacted to news of the Airlift, which helped people in a country they were at war with just a few years before?

What is the legacy of the Cold War? Do Cold War sentiments remain? Connect this article to this month's cover story.

## FAST FACT

More than 1,500 tons of food were airlifted daily to support West Berlin.

## WEB WATCH

[http://topics.nytimes.com/berlin\\_airlift](http://topics.nytimes.com/berlin_airlift)

Historic and current articles and resources from The New York Times.

1 Put these events in chronological order:

- a The Berlin Airlift begins
- b The U.S., Britain, France, and the Soviet Union battle Germany in World War II
- c The Soviets lift the blockade on Berlin
- d Potsdam Conference divides Germany
- e Construction begins on the Berlin Wall

2 Which of the following countries did not occupy West Germany after the Potsdam Conference?

- a United States
- b France
- c Soviet Union
- d Great Britain

3 Why did the Soviets blockade Berlin in 1948?

- a To force West Berliners to be dependent on Soviet and East German supplies
- b To permanently separate families split between East and West Berlin
- c To attempt to incite World War III
- d To protect Communists in West Berlin

4 Which was not a result of the construction of the Berlin Wall?

- a Fewer East Berliners could escape to West Berlin.
- b Families were divided,
- c East Berliners lost their jobs in the Western zone.
- d East Berlin's economy grew stronger.

5 Which U.S. President encouraged the Soviet leader to tear down the Berlin Wall in 1987?

- a Gerald Ford
- b Jimmy Carter
- c Ronald Reagan
- d George W. Bush

6 What impact do you think "the Candy Bomber" had on America's image in Europe?

## IN-DEPTH QUESTIONS

1 How close do you think the U.S. and Soviet Union came to going to war over the airlift? Explain your answer.

2 Why do you think it took so many decades for Germany to reunify?

3 The Berlin Wall was built to keep people in. What countries have built walls to keep people out? How are their world views similar to or different from that of the East German government?

1 b, d, a, c, e

2 [c] Soviet Union

3 [a] To force West Berliners to be dependent on Soviet and East German supplies

4 [d] Germany's economy grew stronger.

5 [c] Ronald Reagan

6 Answers will vary but may include: the desire to enlist the West Germans as allies against the spread of communism in Europe, as well as compassion.

Roberts recalls the 1946's declaration of "iron curtain" of former British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill and reports what had its effects. Behind that curtain, East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Yugoslavia, and the other nations of Central and Eastern Europe had come under the control of the Soviet Union and its ruthless dictator, Joseph Stalin. In June 1948, the Soviets literally tried to cut off West Berlin--located deep within Communist East Germany--with a blockade designed to starve the city into submission. Among other things, Roberts states that on May 12, 1949, the Soviets gave up and lifted the blockade; but the airlift continued through September to build up stockpiles. Thirty-nine British airmen and 31 Americans were among the 101 who died during the airlift, mostly as a result of plane crashes.

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