



**How, 50 years ago this week, Europe was pulled back from the brink of World War III**

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SINCE World War II, it is often said that the nearest the world has come to another all-out conflict was the Cuba Crisis of 1962.

But there was another occasion when we trembled on the brink of World War III. It happened 50 years ago this week, when the Allies went eyeball-to-eyeball with Stalin's Russia on the issue of which of them should dominate a defeated Germany.

In the end, a war did take place - a strange kind of proxy war fought with blockades and airlifts.

Just 78 people died, yet on its outcome depended the future of Europe.

June 24, 1948, was a peaceful summer's day. In England, the sun shone on Wimbledon and on the Test match in which Don Brad-man was making his last appearance as captain of Australia.

In Berlin, the Russians had made their move in the early hours. They cut the supply of electricity from eastern power stations to the western sectors of the city. At Marienborn, they stopped all rail traffic from the western zones.

Canal barges from Hamburg were stopped and turned back.

The blockade of Berlin was complete. West Berlin had stocks of food for some 36 days, and enough coal for 45 days. If the Allies could not keep the city alive after that, Berlin would fall to the Russians, and Soviet domination across the whole of Germany would almost inevitably follow.

In a top-secret report to Prime Minister Clement Attlee, the military governor of the British zone, General Sir Brian Robertson, warned that if the blockade continued, it would almost certainly start a war. British intelligence also warned of it starting World War III.

Trouble had been brewing for some time. Joseph Stalin was deeply suspicious of the West.

Behind its plans for the economic regeneration of Germany, he saw a plot to weaken the Soviet Union and deprive it of the industrial riches of West Germany. He was determined to fight for the spoils of victory, and Berlin was where he would win or lose.

BY JUNE 20, when the Deutschmark was officially introduced, Berlin was already virtually blockaded. Freight trains were being held up (the excuse was always 'technical difficulties') and German motorists were being turned back at Russian checkpoints on the grounds that their passes had not been signed.

The only link with Berlin for Western motorists, a bridge across the Elbe, had been dismantled, and a ramshackle ferry put in its place.

Berliners, their bitter memories of defeat just three years old, feared the worst. In 1945 they had witnessed their wives and daughters raped, and their menfolk randomly shot, by Soviet troops who were never likely to forget that 20 million Russians had died at the hands of the Nazis between 1939 and 1945.

They were right to be afraid. The Allies' reaction to the Soviet blockade of Berlin varied between blind belligerence and a resigned acceptance that they would have to withdraw and abandon the city to Stalin.

After all, the Red Army had not demobilised in 1945. There were 18,000 Soviet soldiers in Berlin almost three times as many as the British, French and American contingents put together - and an estimated 300,000 more troops in the eastern zone which surrounded them. Western observers agreed that any ill-considered move might spark an explosion which could not be contained.

The peppery and autocratic General Lucius Clay, military governor of the American zone, wanted an armed assault across East Germany to West Berlin.

President Truman vetoed it.

But Truman and Attlee between them did, pointedly, agree to the stationing in East Anglia of two squadrons of B-29s, the bombers which, as Stalin would have known, dropped the atomic bombs on Japan.

Meanwhile, the problem of how to defeat the blockade appeared insoluble.

Some 2.2 million Berlin-ers were dependent on supplies of food, fuel and raw materials transported by road, rail and water - 12,500 tons a day. That figure could conceivably be reduced to 4,500 tons a day. The only way into Berlin was along three internationally agreed air corridors.

It was an RAF officer, Wing Commander Rex Waite, who came up with a solution which, at first, appeared crazily optimistic - to take in all the supplies by flying down these three narrow corridors.

According to his wife Jessamy Waite, interviewed on next Monday's Channel 4 programme *The Berlin Airlift*, Waite did a feasibility study, and pleaded to be given ten minutes with Sir Brian Robertson.

Sir Brian talked to Clay, who immediately said: 'I'm with you' - and the decision was made to undertake what would be the biggest airborne operation in history.

But the logistical difficulties were enormous. Of the three airfields in the Western sector, only Tempelhof was suitable. Gatow, in the British sector, needed to be extended; Tegel, in the French sector, had to be built from scratch.

But by the time, on June 28, that the Cabinet in London was studying the plans for an airlift, the first British Dakotas had already left England for Hanover, in pouring rain, to pick up supplies to take on to Tempelhof airfield.

It was the first consignment in what was to turn into a heroic ten-month endeavour to keep West Berlin from surrender. At Gatow, flights arrived every three minutes and had a turnaround time of just six minutes.

Flying in stacks along the air corridors, each pilot was given an exact time, plus or minus 30 seconds, to be over a radio beacon north of the runway. If he missed his approach, he had to carry his cargo back to the home airfield, because there was no time for a second try.

Pilots, many of whom had been bombing Berlin just a few years before, flew two, three or even four flights in a 20-hour day, in fair weather and foul.

Their faces blackened with dust from the coal stuffed into sacks and flour bags, they were dazzled at night by Soviet spotlights shone directly at their cabins, and harassed by day by fighters from the Soviet airforce. They slept where they could, in armchairs or on billiard tables at the airfield.

British pilots flew more than 175,000 sorties, carrying 164,000 tons of coal and 240,000 tons of food. The Americans ferried even more - 55pc of the total.

Between them they took in food, fuel, clothes, cars, medical supplies, a fire engine, a steamroller (sawn in half) and a dismantled power station.

LIFE was hard for the Berliners. They lived off soup, reheated toast and dried potatoes. Disease was rife; hunger was universal.

Coffee, cigarettes, eggs and sugar were traded on the black market.

Those who had nothing left to barter traded their bodies.

According to Monday's film, there was twice as much VD on British bases involved in the airlift as anywhere else in the Army.

But the Berliners survived going to bed early, washing in cold water by the light of a paraffin lamp, walking to work or mending clothes at home, searching for twigs and fallen branches (every other tree in the parks was felled for winter fuel), talking to the children in the evening by the light of a candle, and going out to the street corner at 10pm when the electricity came on, to hear the news over the local loudspeaker.

There was no news: or at any rate, no good news. The months passed, and winter approached.

Stalin gambled that the airlift would crumble under the pressure of short days, icy runways and the need for extra fuel.

It did not, thanks to the courage and determination of the air crews.

What began to collapse was Stalin's confidence that he would drive the Allies from the besieged city.

The cost was mounting - not just financially but in terms of lives. Of the 78 people killed during the airlift, 40 were British and 31 American. Two USAF servicemen were killed when their C47 hit an apartment block on the approach to Tempelhof; 3,000 Germans went to their funeral. Three British Dakotas crashed inside the Russian zone near Lubeck airfield while landing in bad weather.

On one of them was Sergeant Frank Dowling. Hazel Dowling recalls how she found out about her husband's death, opening a newspaper on a bus on her way home and reading how the plane had caught fire and there were no survivors.

The paper faithfully reported that Sergeant Dowling's 'wife was expecting a baby'. Hazel was numbed by the news; she simply couldn't take it in.

THE first sun of the spring of 1949 gave Berliners renewed confidence that the airlift would keep them out of Stalin's clutches. The sound of distant British and American bombers, which had once sent them cowering under the ruins of their city, sent them running towards the airfields to greet the arrival of what they called Rosinenbomber - raisin bombers.

The Allies redoubled their efforts, to demonstrate to the Russians that they could, on occasion, land two or even three times the daily tonnage needed. The best-known pilot was the American **Gail Halvorsen**, nicknamed the Candy Bomber because he dropped chocolate, sweets and chewing gum attached to miniature parachutes which sprinkled down on the children of Berlin.

Stalin realised that he wasn't achieving anything, and had no justification for taking on the Allies in a direct fight. He raised the Berlin blockade on May 12, 1949. The threat of another world conflict receded.

It was the first great victory of the Cold War, and left an indelible impression on the minds of millions of young Germans who, in the Seventies and Eighties, would be leading their country.

It meant, too, that when, in 1961, the Russians put up the Berlin Wall, it was seen for what it was an admission not of Soviet power, but of weakness.

\* SECRET History: The Berlin Airlift on Monday, June 29, on Channel 4 at 9pm.

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LIFELINE: ALLIED PILOTS FLEW UP TO FOUR MISSIONS IN A 20-HOUR DAY TO BRING AID TO THE BESIEGED BERLINERS

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