

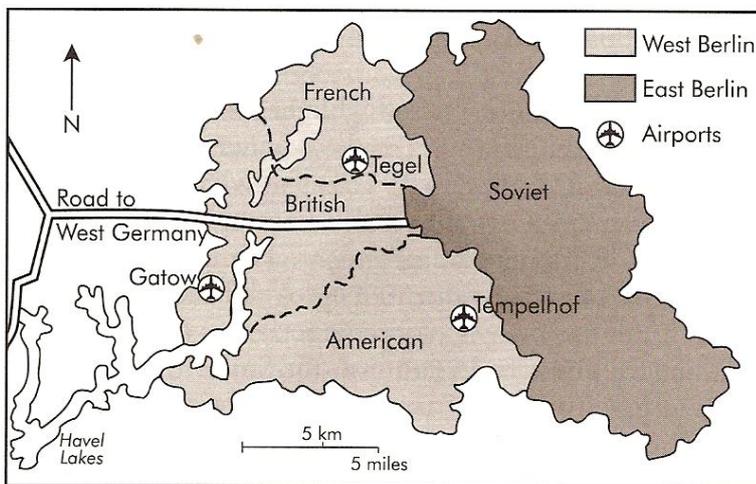
The Berlin Airlift 1948-9

Extract taken from Steve Phillips, *The Cold War* pp.27-31

The Cold War in Europe was to reach its first major crisis with the Berlin Blockade of 1948-9. Although disappointed with the increase in Soviet influence in countries such as Romania, Bulgaria and other parts of eastern Europe, the West could eventually 'forget' them; but Germany was different. Here the troops of both sides stood directly opposite each other: they could not avoid one another. The so-called 'German problem' would not go away because the arrangements agreed at the conferences at Yalta and Potsdam were temporary. At some point, the long-term future of Germany would have to be settled. The Berlin Blockade was one of the Soviet Union's most drastic attempts to influence this future.

Causes of the Berlin Blockade

At the Yalta and Potsdam conferences in 1945 it had been agreed to divide Germany and its capital city Berlin each into four zones to be administered on a temporary basis by the wartime allies (see map below)



The western zones, run by Britain, the USA and France, benefited from an influx of Marshall Aid. The eastern zone, run by the USSR, was plundered for resources, taken as reparations for war damage caused during the Second World War. Denied access to Marshall funds, living conditions in East Germany remained low and were slow to recover. By 1948 the difference in living standards between West and East Germany had become embarrassingly obvious. It was in Berlin that this difference was brought into sharp focus. West Berlin had become an island of prosperous capitalism in a sea of communism. As a symbol of this

increasing prosperity, the western powers decided to introduce a new currency in their zones. The new Deutsche Mark would, it was hoped, provide economic stability and aid recovery. For Stalin this was the last straw.

The issue of Germany was to highlight the different attitudes of the superpowers to the post-war world. Talks in Moscow and London in 1947 between the two sides over the future of Germany broke down as both sides put obstacles in the way of an agreement. The USA did not fear a revived Germany due to its geographical position; in fact it saw Germany's economic revival as essential to US financial interests. In contrast, the Soviet Union had much to fear from a German revival that might lead to a repetition of the suffering caused during the two world wars. Thus, when the new currency was introduced in West Berlin in June 1948, Stalin took action. All road, rail and canal links with West Berlin were severed. The blockade of the city was interpreted by the US government as the first stage of an attack on West Germany. This is unlikely. Stalin may have wished to starve the West out of Berlin, but he probably wanted to prevent the emergence of a separate West German state under US influence.

Results of the blockade



- **Berlin airlift.** The West responded to the blockade by organising an airlift of supplies into Berlin. All food and fuel supplies for over 2 million Berliners were flown into the city. It was an expensive operation executed with impressive organisational skill. Despite constant shortages, the city was able to survive. By May 1949 Stalin was forced to concede defeat and he lifted the blockade. The actions of the West had been successful and it was an important boost to their morale after the events in Czechoslovakia.
- **Creation of NATO.** The Berlin Crisis had illustrated the need for a more coordinated approach by the West in order to prepare for the possibility of Soviet aggression. In April 1949 the USA opened talks with Canada and the countries of western Europe with the aim of committing itself to a military alliance. The result was the setting up of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). This was an enlargement of the Brussels Treaty of 1948, which had been signed by

Britain, France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg to establish military cooperation in the event of war. The significance of NATO was that it involved the USA in a military alliance during peacetime and, therefore, made it clear to the Soviet Union that there would be no return to isolationism. The guiding principle of NATO was that an attack on one of its members would be seen as an attack on all. A NATO command was set up to coordinate the defence of its members. Thus, NATO was a defensive organisation to protect the West and its interests. Stalin viewed the creation of NATO as a deliberately provocative action but he was able to enhance the capability of the Soviet Union by breaking the US nuclear monopoly. The Soviet Union exploded its first atomic bomb in August 1949, earlier than the West had expected. Despite this increase in Soviet power, the Berlin Crisis and the formation of NATO had taken any initiative in Cold War relations away from the USSR.



• **Creation of FDR and GDR.** Another significant result of the Berlin Crisis was the end to any hope of an agreement between East and West over Germany. The temporary division of the country, laid down at Yalta and Potsdam, was now to become a more permanent feature. In August 1949 the three western zones of Germany joined together to become the Federal Republic of Germany (commonly known as West Germany). In response, the Soviet zone became the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) in October. As capitalism flourished in West Germany, communism was imposed upon East Germany. It was a division that was to last for forty years.

The Berlin Crisis of 1948—9 marked the first major flashpoint of the Cold War. Relations between the USA and the USSR, former allies against Nazi Germany, reached such a low position of distrust and suspicion that it became difficult to have any meaningful dialogue, let alone agreement. Conflict and tension were to remain constant features of East-West relations for another forty years with important consequences for Europe and the rest of the world.

SUMMARY: HOW DID THE USA ATTEMPT TO CONTAIN COMMUNISM IN EUROPE 1945-9?

- By agreement — e.g. at the Yalta and Potsdam conferences. Roosevelt favoured this method. Truman felt that Stalin would not keep to any agreements and preferred other methods.
- By the deterrent of nuclear weapons. Between 1945 and 1949 the USA was the only country to possess the atomic bomb.
- By applying the Truman Doctrine — i.e. by sending military aid and advisers to those governments facing the threat of communism. This method was used in Greece.
- By economic measures under the Marshall Plan. Economic recovery would restore prosperity to Europe and make the spread of communism less likely.
- By propaganda. Communist actions in Czechoslovakia and elsewhere in Europe were condemned by the West. It was hoped that this would shame them into limiting the spread of communism.
- By non-cooperation with the USSR. The USA put obstacles in the way of reaching agreements over the future of Germany.
- By firm action. This was what Truman termed the Iron Fist approach. The West's refusal to give in during the Berlin Blockade by organising the airlift was evidence of this in action.
- By military alliance. The involvement of the USA in the formation of NATO showed that the USA was not going to return to isolationism.

Activity

Complete the simplified revision diagram to show the causes and consequences of the Berlin Airlift.