

The Berlin Airlift 1948/49

Text for Presentation Lecture

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[In order to start the films on pages 2 and 27, go to the respective page and click on it once with the cursor. If you want to continue with the presentation, you must first click the presentation header on pages 2/27 using the cursor, before you can click on the arrow keys again.]

The History of the Berlin Airlift

[Show film]

Crisis in Berlin

[Show map of the four zones of occupation]



After the surrender of the Third Reich in 1945, the four victorious powers – the USA, the Soviet Union, Great Britain and France – occupied Germany and divided the country into four zones of occupation, a process agreed upon at the preceding war conferences. Berlin received a special status: Although the former capital of the Reich was located within the Soviet Zone of Occupation, it was also divided into four sectors. For the Western powers, the USA, Britain and France, this meant that they had to administer their sectors in the city far away from their zones of occupation in Western Germany.

Joint administration by the victorious powers worked reasonably well in 1945 and 1946. In the two years that followed, however, the differences of opinion became increasingly pronounced. They could not agree on a shared policy towards Germany. The idea of a Communist social order supported by the Soviet Union was incompatible with the democratic values of the Western powers. The Cold War in Germany began.

[Show definition of the Cold War]

Cold War, The

Significance: The Cold War was a global conflict in which the West under the leadership of the USA struggled for world supremacy against the Soviet Union and the Eastern Block it dominated. It was above all ideologically, economically, and technologically driven. Militarily, the competition between both blocs fueled an unprecedented arms race and escalated in numerous proxy wars.

A failed joint attempt at currency reform in Germany by the four victorious powers in the summer of 1948 provided the catalyst for the Berlin Blockade.

[Show photo of blockaded trucks]



In late June, the Soviet occupying power blocked access from the Western zones of occupation to West Berlin, by road, water and rail.

[Show discussion question]

Together, think about what the Soviet Union hoped to achieve with the blockade of the access roads to Berlin.

→ The Soviet Union hoped that the Western powers would pull their troops out of the occupied sectors of Berlin so that all of Berlin would fall within the Soviet Union's sphere of influence.

Operation Airlift

[Show discussion question]

What measures did the Western powers take in response to the Berlin Blockade? What could alternative reactions have looked like?

→ The Western powers set up the Airlift to provide supplies for their troops and the West Berlin population. Other possible reactions could have been: (i) withdrawal of their troops from Berlin, or (ii) a military reaction. For the Western powers there was no question of a withdrawal. (See statement by Lucius D. Clay). A military reaction was just as unlikely, because of the danger of escalation and a wider war was too great. The Western powers assumed that the Soviet Union would also not go so far as to risk a war. Thus they decided that they would use the air corridor contractually agreed upon with the Soviet Union as a means of setting up an airlift.

The USA, Great Britain, and France realized that they would have to withdraw their troops from the city, if they did not succeed in securing supplies for their own troops and the population of Berlin.

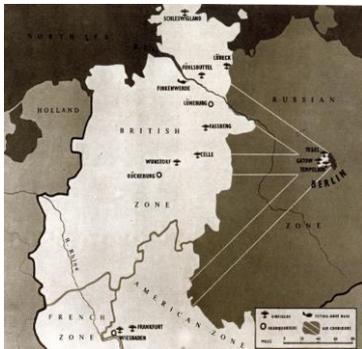
A withdrawal from Berlin would have far-reaching international consequences, as General Lucius D. Clay made clear:

[Show citation by Clay]

“Why are we in Europe? We have lost Czechoslovakia. We have lost Finland. Norway is threatened. ... After Berlin, will come Western Germany....If we mean that we are to hold Europe against communism, we must not budge.” (April 1948)

Since the governments in Washington, London and Paris did not want to respond with military intervention, their only option was a daring plan: to supply the city exclusively from the air via the three existing corridors.

[Show map with corridors and airports.]



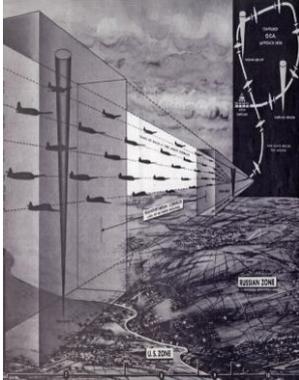
The American and British supply flights left for West Berlin from nine airfields in the Western zones of occupation. Some 2.3 million inhabitants had to be provided with 1,500 calories a day each.

[Show photo of airplanes]



A Question of Organization

[Show graphic of airplanes in the corridors]



The Berlin Airlift was essentially carried out by the US Air Force and the British Royal Air Force. During the first few weeks a lack of transport planes and experience with airlifts proved problematic. The appointment of US Lieutenant General William H. Tunner as commander of the American and British transport fleet marks the beginning of the success story of "Operation Vittles." Tunner planned the logistics while the US military governor in Germany General Lucius D. Clay was responsible for political support and additional aircraft.

[Show statement by Tunner]

"Even to think of supplying a city by air alone was daring. It had never been done before." (1964)

At first there were 102 American and 94 British planes involved, but their capacity was far too low to supply even the minimum requirements of 4,500 tonnes per day. The US Air Force therefore ordered all available crews and planes from their overseas bases to Europe. Starting in January 1949, 200 planes with much greater carrying capacities participated in the airlift.

[Show photo of situation control room]



In the spring of 1949 the Berlin Airlift was a well-oiled machine that had no trouble supplying West Berlin. On Easter 1949, 1,398 aircraft flew to the three airfields of Gatow, Tempelhof and Tegel within 24 hours. Planes took off and landed every minute.

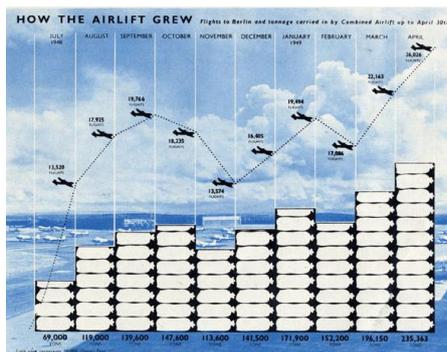
[Show discussion question]

On April 16th, 1949, the Airlift airplanes delivered 12,940 tons of coal to the Western sectors of Berlin: it was a joint record performance by the Airlift pilots and the German freight loaders. Together, think about what was supposed to have been demonstrated by this record achievement.

→ The international public and particularly the Soviet Union were to witness the failure of the Berlin Blockade with their own eyes. The Western powers showed that they were in the position to supply West Berlin from the air.

Of Coal and Raisins

[Show tonnage graphic]



The blockade of the Western sectors hit the population hard. The energy supply was completely inadequate, only hospitals were heated.

But the airlift guaranteed the basics. Class III ration cards entitled their holders to 400 grams of bread, 50 grams of cereal products, 40 grams of meat, 30 grams of fat, 400 grams of dried potatoes and 5 grams of cheese a day.

The daily cargo tonnage rose steadily during the early months despite the approaching winter endangering the provisions to the city from the air. Coal represented the bulk of cargo, but flour, powdered milk, gasoline and all of the other necessities of life were also flown to Berlin.

In total, 2.1 million tonnes of goods reached West Berlin via air. Foodstuffs were generally flown in dehydrated form: in this way the transport weight and the perishability of the foodstuffs were reduced.

People, mail, and some industrial goods were transported out of the city on the return flights.

[Show CARE packet photo]



On November 27th, 1945, 22 American charitable organizations founded the “Cooperative for American Remittances to Europe”, abbreviated as C.A.R.E. During the Airlift, aid organizations had over 200,000 packets with foodstuffs, clothing, or tools delivered to needy people in Berlin.

[Show discussion question]

Three years after the end of World War II, Allied airplanes brought supplies to the former capital city of the Reich. Together, think about how the people in the USA reacted to this aid action.

Why did public reaction look different in France and Great Britain?

→ In the post-war period in the USA there were numerous relief efforts for the populations of war-torn Europe, in particular for Germany and Berlin. This can be read as the USA's own understanding of itself as a superpower in the struggle to contain communism.

In France and Great Britain, two countries that were directly hit by Nazi aerial bombardments and later suffered from significant supply problems in the post-war years, efforts to provide aid for Germany were significantly more restrained. In addition, in France the fact that the communist party enjoyed relatively widespread support among the French public also played a counter role.

How Enemies became Friends

[Show cartoon of transport services]



This monumental transport achievement was a major factor in the failure of the Soviet blockade, which was lifted on May 12th, 1949. The access routes to West Berlin were open once again. Nevertheless, the Airlift continued until September 30th, 1949 in order to fill the storerooms and forestall another blockade.

[Show photo with CARE truck]



The two German states were founded soon after the end of the Berlin Blockade – the Federal Republic of Germany in May 1949 and the German Democratic Republic in October 1949. The Airlift had altered West Germans' and West Berliners' relationship with the former occupying powers, especially the USA.

[Show discussion question]

Discuss: to what extent was the Berlin Airlift a turning point in the relationships among the Western powers and the West Berliners?

→ Among the former war enemies, alliances were formed against the influence of communism in the Western occupation zones and West Berlin. Only three years after the end of the war, the Western powers recognized their responsibility for Berlin, and supplied the population in the western segment of the city from the air. In the eyes of most of the population, the Americans, British, and French thus shed their status as occupying troops and became protective powers instead.

Remember, but how?

[Show photo of memorial ceremony]



The Berlin Airlift was a success because many people in different positions took right and courageous decisions. This is as true of leading politicians and military commanders as of those immediately involved in the Airlift, whether in the air or on the ground. For the West Berliners they became friends providing help in their hour of need and supporting their struggle for freedom. Airlift personnel, in turn, admired the Berliners because they never wavered in their determination to defeat the blockade. But the real “heroes” of the Airlift were those who gave their lives for it. They are commemorated in Berlin every year on 12th May. Thirty-one Americans and thirty-nine men flying for Great Britain lost their lives. At least eight Germans also died in the Airlift.

[Show photo of the Airlift Hip Hop]



A totally different way of approaching the history of the Berlin Airlift was sponsored by the Berlin Airlift Gratitude Foundation (Stiftung Luftbrückendank): in connection with a hip hop and street dance festival, a group came up with a dance number on the topic of “mobility and the airlift,” which they performed in front of the Airlift memorial in Berlin Tempelhof.

[Show discussion question]

Every year on May 12th, the Berlin Senate holds a memorial ceremony at the Airlift Monument and lays a wreath in commemoration of the end of the Berlin Blockade. Together, think about why and in what form this first crisis in the Cold War in 1948/49 should be commemorated in the future.

Airlift Ambassador

[Show photo of Halvorsen by the fence]



US pilot Gail S. Halvorsen (b. 1920) is one of the most well-known pilots of the Berlin Airlift. While meeting Berlin children he spontaneously decided to drop handkerchief-parachutes filled with sweets during approach flights to Tempelhof Airport.

[Show photo of Halvorsen dropping the chocolate parachutes]



When chocolate suddenly started raining from the sky, Berlin children were so excited and grateful that Halvorsen decided to continue with Operation "Little Vittles." Because he didn't have time to make these parachutes every day, the little town of Chicopee on the East Coast of the USA became a center for a big campaign to assemble these, with 22 area schools taking part. Starting in January 1949, every other day an airplane with 800 pounds of sweets on board flew from the USA to Germany, with the parachutes distributed among the Airlift planes.

Because Halvorsen received such a massive amount of fan mail from Berlin children, an office with two secretaries was set up at the US military base in Frankfurt Main in order to answer the children's letters. The 'Little Vittles' operation is still today embedded in the memories of older Berliners, and played an important part in bringing the former war enemies back together.

[Show how to make a chocolate parachute]

Stick the chocolate bar into the string noose and draw it tight. Tie each of the four strings to a corner of the handkerchief. And finally throw the parachute up into the air!

Humanitarian Aid during the Berlin Airlift

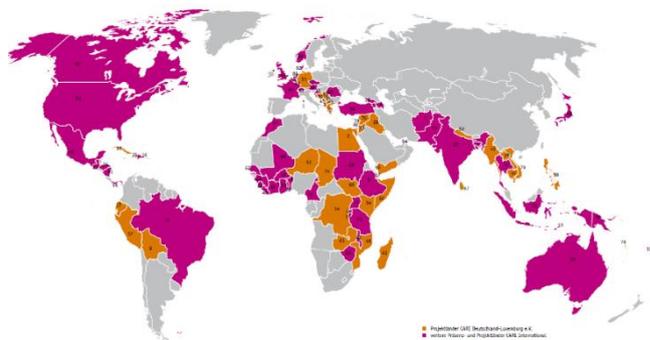
[Show film]

The Berlin Airlift has been the biggest humanitarian relief action of its time. CARE provided about 200.000 CARE-Packages for the West sector of Berlin. It thus laid the foundation for international humanitarian cooperation in war and crisis regions, which continues to this day.

Humanitarian Aid today

More than 70 years after the Berlin Airlift, CARE is one of the world's largest humanitarian organizations, active in around 90 countries against poverty and hardship.

[Show map]



Today CARE means **C**ooperative for **A**ssistance and **R**elief **E**verywhere and is a global network of **14 National Members** : USA (1945), Australien (1987), Kanada (1946), Japan



(1987), Deutschland (1980), Dänemark (1988), Norwegen (1980), Niederlande (2001), Frankreich (1983), Thailand (2003), Großbritannien (1985), Indien (2013), Österreich (1986) und Peru (2014)

CARE International has about 10,000 employees worldwide.

[Show photos]



Logistics - access to people in need - is still one of the biggest challenges for humanitarian organizations like CARE. For example in Mozambique:

In Mozambique, CARE was the first aid organization on the ground, opened its stocks and began survival assistance on the night of the storm. Where access routes are buried underneath rubble, mud and water, CARE still uses air and waterways today to bring help to people in need. In the first four weeks in Mozambique, CARE delivered tents, drinking water and emergency food by helicopters and boats to people in the cut off areas. Wherever roads are not accessible by vehicles, CARE also uses pack animals. To people in villages on steep slopes, CARE sometimes even provides help on foot.

[Show discussion question]

Try answering the question in groups: How can humanitarian relief operations be organized today? What aid supplies are needed? How can people in need be reached?

→ Stages of CARE emergency aid

Hours 0 to 24

Emergency Alert: CARE Headquarters in Geneva receive early warnings and information from the crisis area. An international team of experts flies into the disaster-hit area and supports the local CARE team in identifying the most urgent needs. Permits from local governments are being obtained.

Hour 24 to 48

Start of emergency aid: emergency shelters, drinking water, water tanks and water purifying substances are being distributed to ensure the supply of food and relief items. Help is always

provided in coordination with the coordinating United Nations, governments and other aid actors. This is to ensure on the one hand that everybody receives help, on the other hand that help is not duplicated.

Hour 48 to 6 months

The most important supply lines are being restored: after cleanup, the local water supply is being repaired, traumatized people receive medical and psychosocial care, initial reconstruction measures begin.

6 months to 3 years

Disaster-resilient water, health and education infrastructure is being rebuilt, communities are being supported to redevelop destroyed fields, livelihoods and income bases, civil protection trainings are being conducted to improve the safety of the population.