
How Foolish Decisions by the United States Led to the Berlin Airlift and How Prudent Ones Turned the Situation to Their Advantage

Magnus Münzinger

Magnus Münzinger is an exchange student from Nördlingen, Germany. He wrote this paper for Professor Edmund Wehrle's HIS 3800: American Diplomatic History. After spring semester 2018, Mr. Münzinger will return to Germany to continue his education at Julius-Maximilians Universität Würzburg.

Introduction

“Today is the day when the people of Berlin raise their voices. [...] You people of the world! You people in America and England, France and Italy! Look at this city and realize that you mustn’t abandon this people, can’t abandon them!”¹ West Berlin Mayor Ernst Reuter was concerned. When he gave that speech on September 9, 1948, the roads from the western territories of Germany to Berlin had been blocked for almost three months by the Soviet Union. No truck could supply the inhabitants of the Western part of the old capitol of Germany with food and coal.² How could it come that far? The Soviet Union took a drastic step when it cut off access to the city, but in any conflict usually more than one party is responsible: this situation was no exception. After 1945 the Americans made some foolish decisions that led directly to the Berlin crisis, which otherwise maybe could have been prevented. Later they prudently were able to turn the situation around with the Berlin Airlift. The Berlin people survived and the western sectors did not fall into the hands of the Soviets, because of smart strategy. During 1948 and 1949 the United States managed to change a bad initial situation, which it partially caused, to their advantage and thereby win the first “battle” in the Cold War.

Rising Tensions

Shortly after World War II, tensions between the victorious nations grew. After its capitulation, Germany had been divided into four occupation zones, each held by one of the “Siegermächte.” The western territories were occupied by the British and the United States, while the Soviet Union was responsible for eastern Germany. Eventually, France would also get a zone in the West. Those agreements had been made in a series of conferences, most importantly the ones in Yalta, which had been held between Franklin D. Roosevelt, Winston Churchill and Joseph Stalin; then later at Potsdam, between Harry S. Truman, Stalin, Churchill, and Clement Atlee (who succeeded Churchill). Directly after the war, Berlin was controlled by the Russians, but the Allies agreed on splitting up the capitol among themselves, even though the city was over 100 miles deep in Soviet occupied territory. In July and August 1945, the western Allies started occupying their sectors. An agreement the Soviets pushed through was that each part of Berlin should be supplied by its respective allied occupant. The agreement caused problems for the Americans, British and French, as they had to transport food and other essential goods into their zones, a problem the Soviets did not have. They could provide their sector with the products from the surrounding agricultural Brandenburg, which they had effectively cut off from the other Allies.³ After the Yalta

¹ Christain Härtel, *Berlin: A Short History* (Berlin: Be.Bra Verlag, 2016), 56.

² Ibid.

³ Roger G. Miller, *To Save a City: The Berlin Airlift 1948-1949* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), 1-3.

conference, the relationship between the Soviet and the western states deteriorated. The United States tried to contain the communist expansion and the USSR boycotted the Marshall Plan. In 1947 the eastern powers claimed that the Allies were violating the Potsdam agreement, while the Westerners built up a separate, more and more independent capitalist West-Germany (or bizonia, a combination of the British and U.S. zones, later joined by the French zone). The permanent splitting of Germany became apparent, which caused the Soviets to claim that Berlin could no longer be the capitol of the entire country.⁴

Start of the Blockade

The looming crisis manifested itself in 1948. Negotiations concerning a joint currency between the western Allies and the USSR had failed, and the Soviet representatives walked out of the Allied Control Council.⁵ The Westerners decided to create a new currency and announced it on June 18th, 1948.⁶ Two days later, the Deutsche Mark was introduced in West-Germany, but not in Berlin.⁷ Especially, economic advisor (and later chancellor) Ludwig Erhard advocated the abolition of the Reichsmark and the switch to the Deutsche Mark, which should help the struggling German economy and counter inflation. The introduction of a new currency without having made an agreement with the Soviets before, was one of the foolish decisions made by the Americans, as the reform played a huge role in the emergence of the Berlin Blockade. The consequences of that move could and should have been predicted. The old Reichsmark became worthless in the western zones, if not traded for new Deutsche Mark, which could have caused a flood of the depreciating currency into the eastern zone.⁸ As a counter, the Soviets then announced its own currency, the Ostmark, on June 22.⁹ To stop Reichsmark from flooding into their territories, the Soviets halted all traffic from West-Germany into the whole of Berlin.¹⁰ On that exact day, the blockade of the city by the Soviets began.¹¹ For experts in national economics, this effect could not have been completely surprising, therefore it was either a foolish decision or a high risk. To be fair though, even if the circumstances suggested it, financial reasons were secondary for the forced segregation of the city. It was rather a struggle for the upper hand in Berlin and consequently, Germany. Ernst Reuter, former mayor of West Berlin, summed up the situation by saying that the one who controls the currency gains power over the territory. Even though Berlin was not of strategic importance, the symbolism it conveyed was not to be underestimated.¹² The currency reform may not have been the most important reason for the blockade, but it certainly was the flash point.

After the Soviets had made their move by stopping every ground traffic from the west to the city, the United States had to decide how to handle the situation. Berlin was cut off from supplies—the situation was critical. The decision lay with U.S. President Harry Truman and his administration. In the end, they were thinking of the bigger picture, which encouraged prudence. They knew that

⁴ History.com Staff, “Berlin Blockade,” <http://www.history.com/topics/cold-war/berlin-blockade>, accessed December 2, 2017.

⁵ Härtel, *Berlin*, 55f.

⁶ Andrei Cherny, *The Candy Bombers: The Untold Story of the Berlin Airlift and America's Finest Hour* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2008), 235.

⁷ Miller, *To Save A City*, 18.

⁸ Bryan Taylor, “The Currency Reform that Created Two Germanies,” Global Financial Data, <http://www.globalfinancialdata.com/gfdblog/?p=3142>, accessed December 2, 2017.

⁹ Miller, *To Save A City*, 18f.

¹⁰ Taylor, “The Currency Reform that Created Two Germanies.”

¹¹ Härtel, *Berlin*, 56.

¹² “Berlinblockade der Sowjetunion und der Luftbrücke der Westmächte,” Lernhelfer, (last modified 2010), <https://www.lernhelfer.de/schuelerlexikon/geschichte/artikel/berlinblockade-der-sowjetunion-und-luftbruecke-der-westmaechte>.

losing Berlin could mean losing Germany entirely.¹³ In an article, Russian historians Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov evaluated Joseph Stalin's decisions during the time of the blockade. A reunified Germany under Western control was one of his biggest fears, therefore he wanted to increase his control over the country. With the blockade, he went one step too far and overestimated his position, even though the economic situation in the Soviet territories was better than in the western parts after the war. With their party SED and the boycott of the Marshall Plan, the Soviets tried to gain control over Berlin. Stalin distanced himself from a diplomatic solution for a united future of Germany. In 1947, East German communists acceded to Stalin's desire to create a satellite East German regime, which eventually led to the Berlin Blockade.¹⁴

The Missing Agreement

One problem with the blockade was that it was not as illegitimate as it seems. Indeed, the postwar era proved chaotic, and dividing Germany into four parts created grave unforeseen problems. Parting Berlin was even more difficult as it was deep in the Soviet zone. There were a lot of issues that had to be dealt with, like the rebuilding of the city, which was in ruins, and the feeding of its population. There were neither gas nor electricity, and water supply was far from dependable. Bridges had been destroyed. There were not enough hospital beds. The population of Berlin struggled simply to survive in the aftermath of World War II.¹⁵ What had foolishly been forgotten was to issue a formal agreement that assured the western Allies overland access to their territories. It had simply been assumed that the western forces would be given access, and no one in power expected a conflict with the Soviet Union that would make an explicit agreement necessary. This was naivety on a big scale. The fact that a formal treaty was missing gave power to the Soviets, who could now claim that access to the city was not the right of the western parties, but more granted out of Soviet courtesy. It also meant the occupiers of East Germany could withdraw that favor, which they eventually did.¹⁶ What seemed like a matter of course, turned out to be essential.

What Now?

When the United States decided to counter the blockade, the option of a military intervention was on the table. The leadership made a prescient decision by not taking that step after analyzing the situation. The commander of the American military forces in Germany understood that the blockade did not only put the people in Berlin into a bad situation materially, but also forced the inhabitants into accepting Soviet authority over the city. A military solution was a possibility, but finally President Truman decided prudently, that the risk was too high.¹⁷ He and his administration had to keep in mind that any action might cause retaliation and could start a war. On April 2, 1948, the CIA published an investigation about the situation in which it concluded that the USSR would probably not take military action during 1948, but the investigation also included a warning that if the Kremlin saw any move by the United States as an indication or intention to attack the USSR or

¹³ History.com Staff, "Berlin Blockade."

¹⁴ Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov, "Stalin's Inexorable Aggression," in *Major Problems in American Foreign Relations, Volume II: Since 1914*, 4th ed., eds. Thomas G. Paterson and Dennis Merrill (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1995), 285 - 295.

¹⁵ Härtel, *Berlin*, 54.

¹⁶ Miller, *To Save A City*, 1 - 3.

¹⁷ Robert P. Gratwol and Donita M. Moorhus, *American Forces in Berlin: Cold War Outpost* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 1994), 31.

its satellites, it would probably respond militarily.¹⁸ The same conclusion was drawn later in another investigation about the same topic.¹⁹ If Truman really had decided to fight for Berlin, the USSR would have defended it, according to the investigation, and therefore would have started a war. Another way had to be found.

The Airlift

Supporting Berlin over the roads or the ground in general was hardly possible without breaking the blockade violently. The Soviets did not even break a formal agreement, so, in a sense, military action would have made an attack more legitimate, due to the fact that no agreement had been made regulating the overland way to the city. Luckily, another treaty had been signed three years before. There were three air corridors from West-Germany to West-Berlin that had been warranted by the Soviets in 1945 and 1946. The fact that airways had been secured shows prudence on the one hand, but proves foolishness on the other, because it meant that routes of transportation had been an issue and had been discussed. Surprisingly, the importance of the roads had just been completely underestimated. The air corridors were Frankfurt-Berlin, Bückeburg-Berlin and Hamburg-Berlin, and they were 20 English miles wide. Additionally, the Berlin Control Zone had been established, which was a free flight zone in a radius of 20 miles around the Allied Control Authority Building in the capitol.²⁰ The existence of the corridors opened a legal path to Berlin, which did not require military engagement.

To understand the thought process of the American representatives, the memoirs of President Truman give great insight. After the Russians recognized that the Marshall Plan worked, he wrote, they decided to capulate off their territories completely from the western ones. As a response, the western forces started building up and restoring their assigned territories on their own, without the involvement of the Soviets. At that point, it became obvious that the reunification of Germany was unlikely. During 1947, Truman received reports that the German economy was nearing collapse, and that the Americans had to put more effort into its restoration. A healthy Germany was essential for the European economy and so measures to encourage this development had been included in the Marshall Plan. Concerning the Russians, Truman claims their walkout of the Allied Control Council was nothing that came as a surprise. For Germany it meant that the “four-power control machinery had become unworkable.” What would cause a problem for Germany would cause a major crisis in Berlin. Truman of course has the American view on the issue: the president complained that the currency the Soviets introduced only increased inflation and that the Russians purposely tried to manipulate the German economy. For the president, the currency reform was pivotal for the beginning of the blockade. Yet, to Truman, the real intentions of the Soviets were to get the western forces out of Berlin. The blockade was actually a fight for power over Germany and Europe.²¹ A written agreement over access to the city, Truman reasoned, would have made only little difference, because the symbolic importance of Berlin was too high and the whole struggle was not about legal agreements:

¹⁸ “Possibility of Direct Soviet Military Action During 1948,” April 2, 1948, in *On the Front Lines of the Cold War: Documents on the Intelligence, War in Berlin, 1946-1961*, ed. Donald P. Steury (Washington, D.C.: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1999), 142 - 146.

¹⁹ Ibid, 149 - 152.

²⁰ “Flight Rules by Allied Control Authority Air Directorate for Aircraft Flying in Air Corridors in Germany and Berlin Control Zone,” October 22, 1946, in *Notes on Berlin 1943-1963*, eds. Wolfgang Heidemeyer and Günther Hindrichs. (München: R. Oldenburg Verlag, 1963), 39f.

²¹ Harry S. Truman, *Memoirs by Harry S. Truman, Volume Two: Years of Trial and Hope* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1956), 120 - 123.

The Kremlin had chosen perhaps the most sensitive objective in Europe - Berlin, the old capital of Germany, which was and is a symbol to the Germans. If we fail to maintain our position there, Communism would gain great strength among the Germans. [...] If we wished to remain there, we would have to make a show of strength. [...] Russia might deliberately choose to make Berlin the pretext for war[.]²²

The blockade created a huge threat for the future of Europe, he concluded. Even though Truman's memoirs in some ways sound like excuses for not trying to establish a better relationship with the Russians and justify why the United States accepted the portioning of Germany, his argument is comprehensible and also accords with the evaluation of Stalin's aggression by Zubok and Pleshakov.

The introduction of a new currency and the missing agreement on access to Berlin were still of foolish nature. But after the blockade had already started, American prudence took over. Truman's reaction on the crisis was as simple as it was brilliant and its impact was tremendous. Until a diplomatic solution had been found, an "airlift" would be installed. The installment was one of the most prudent moves the Americans made in all of the Cold War. All their available planes in Europe should use the air corridors to bring supplies to the isolated city. Advisors had convinced Truman that the people in Berlin were absolutely indignant regarding Soviet control, which gave the Americans the backing they needed for solving the crisis, even though the airlift supplied only up to 2,500 tons per day, when actually about 4,500 were needed. Still, the clever organization of the flights made it possible for the population of the city to survive until the blockade had been opened.²³ To be fair, although the United States started the airlift, they were not the only ones to participate in it. While the French built up infrastructure to make the landing and taking-off of so many planes possible, the British RAF also sent their planes with supplies to aid in the mission.²⁴

The German Perspective

"It tasted like barbwire, but we were happy to have it," recalls Ulrich Krischbaum, a habitant in Berlin, who was six years old when the airlift began. "Before the blockade we had nothing and when it began even less." Proof of the prudence of the decision for the U.S. airlift is how it was perceived in Germany, and how it led to a better relationship between the two peoples. The situation in Berlin was precarious, but the people survived and were thankful.²⁵ To this day, the events of that time are in the memory of the German people. Growing up in Bavaria, I remember learning about the "Rosinenbomber" in my history class in high school. When the blockade ended in May 1949, 2.3 million tons of supplies had been transported in over 277,000 flights. The effort of the pilots did not only help the population to survive, it also created a "new atmosphere of friendship between the defeated and the victors," as Christian Härtel describes it in his book, *Berlin, A Short History*.²⁶ What made the operation more than just the provision of essential goods, were the pilots' efforts to put smiles on the faces of German children. The first of them was Lieutenant Gail S. Halvorson, who became known as "Der Schokoladen-flieger" (German for "the chocolate pilot"). When he was on one of his trips to the city, he noticed children at the airport. He started speaking to them and promised to come back with candy. Soon parachutes started dropping from his airplane holding chocolate bars and other sweets. His supervisors heard about what Halvorson did, but

²² Ibid, 123f.

²³ Ibid, 123 - 126.

²⁴ Härtel, *Berlin*, 56f.

²⁵ Lydia Leipert, "Alle Wollten Schokolade - und Ich War Zu Klein," *Spiegel* Online, June 24, 2008, <http://www.spiegel.de/einestages/berliner-luftbruecke-a-949342.html>.

²⁶ Härtel, *Berlin*, 57.

instead of stopping him, they liked the effort and soon more planes started dropping candy over the joyfully waiting children. The “Rosinenbomber” were born. Kirschbaum, the six year old boy from Berlin, had also heard that a pilot named Halvorson was dropping nice things over the city. He was too small to fight for one of those little boxes against the other children, but later he was invited to a Christmas party on an American base. Until today he remembers that while he ate cookies and milk, he did not feel like a defeated enemy, but felt that the Americans wanted to help him. With their kindness and helpfulness the U.S. soldiers formed a strong bond with the West-Berlin population.²⁷ They thanked them by not accepting Soviet authority. When the Russians offered cheap food and oil in exchange for a pledge not to accept supplies from the Americans, only one out of a hundred accepted the bargain.²⁸

Blockade Ends - Airlift Wins

The Americans had helped the population of Berlin through their hardest period since the end of the war until today, but the love of the people was not everything they got from their help. For Joseph Stalin, the airlift was a huge propaganda defeat. He had no option to stop it, apart from shooting planes down and thereby starting World War III. In May 1949 Stalin gave up and lifted the blockade.²⁹ His plan to gain control over all of Germany or at least all of Berlin failed. He wanted to use the population of Berlin as hostages. They were his bargaining chips in negotiations with the Allies. If they did not want to let the West-Berlin people starve, they would have to meet his demands. Because of the airlift, the Allies could negotiate without pressure, as they knew the people were taken care of.³⁰ The most genius aspect of the airlift was probably that Stalin did not have any realistic options to stop it.

Evaluation

The historian Melvyn Leffler elaborated in an article on how the American leaders showed prudence during the Berlin Blockade, because they understood that it was important to keep western Europe out of the Soviet’s grasp. Leffler claims that it was wise that Truman decided not to abandon Berlin and he called the steps they took to help keep the people in Berlin alive as a wise calculated risk.³¹ I can only agree with that, although foolish decisions by the United States partially caused the blockade in the first place. The Americans showed fair and sophisticated behavior in victory, whereas the Soviet Union tried to exploit their power over the defeated nation.

Still, the outcome was not all positive. The blockade may have ended and the United States won the first “battle” of the Cold War, but the conflict between East and West had hardened. In the west, the Federal Republic of Germany had been founded, while the Soviet Union created a state on its own, the German Democratic Republic.³² The division remained until many years later on October 3, 1990, when the country was finally reunited. The Berlin people were thankful for the help in their time of need, but in the next years the German population grew more and more independent. In 1963 John F. Kennedy may have been “ein Berliner,” which caused over 300,000

²⁷ Leipert, “Alle Wollten Schokolade.”

²⁸ Gratwol and Moorhus, *American Forces in Berlin*, 48.

²⁹ John Preston, “How the ‘bonkers’ Berlin Airlift Beat Stalin: British and American Troops Defied the Odds and Came to the Rescue of the Desperate Berliners,” *DailyMail.com*, October 19, 2017, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/books/article-4998448/How-bonkers-Berlin-Airlift-beat-Stalin.html>.

³⁰ Miller, *To Save A City*, 104.

³¹ Melvyn P. Leffler, “With a Preponderance of Power: America’s Wise, Prudent, and Foolish Leaders,” In *Major Problems in American Foreign Relations, Volume II: Since 1914*, 303.

³² Gratwol and Moorhus, *American Forces in Berlin*, 54.

people to cheer him, but that did not mean that the German people would go along with every step the U.S. would take.³³ As soon as the United States engaged in the conflict in Vietnam, protesting voices got louder and louder in the aspiring European nation. Especially students took a stand against the war and condemned the policy of the U.S. administration, by going into the streets, expressing their protest. Still, the cultural influence of the Americans on the Germans was huge and is to this day.³⁴ The Berlin Airlift was a pivotal, prudent move by the U.S. government and prevented Berlin from falling into the hands of the communists. By not using any form of military violence in the conflict, President Truman and his advisors chose the ideal way to deal with a situation that could also have led to war. After having made mistakes, they managed to turn a bad situation to their advantage, into the first win in the Cold War.

³³ Härtel, *Berlin*, 65.

³⁴ Thomas Adam and Will Kaufmann, eds., *Germany and the Americas: Culture, Politics, and History* (Santa Barbara: ABC Clio, 2005), 1099.