

The Berlin Blockade and the Airlift of 1948/1949

Almost seventy years ago, from 26 June 1948 to 30 September 1949, the sound of Allied aircraft overhead day and night was audible proof for the people of Berlin that America, Great Britain, and France were standing up to the Soviet blockade that threatened the city's freedom.

Taking a look back at the first Berlin crisis illuminates some basic facts that are fundamental to understanding the political situation in today's unified city.

The four victorious powers had agreed already during World War II to divide Germany into four zones and to make Greater Berlin a quadripartite administrative area.

The zones to the west were occupied by the United States, Great Britain, and France, while the Soviet Union took the zone to the east. In each of those zones, ultimate authority lay with the zone's military government.

Berlin, located inside the Soviet zone about 180 km from that zone's western border, was divided into four sectors headed by the city commandants of each occupying power. An Allied Kommandatura made up of the four city commandants was to be jointly responsible for Berlin as a whole.

There were serious differences even on the subject of political geography: according to the Soviets, Germany's capital city was located "on the territory of the Soviet zone" (which later became the GDR), while the Western powers saw Berlin as an area under joint four-power administration that was surrounded by the Soviet zone.

This crucial question of legal status initially had little relevance to the everyday lives of the people of Berlin, who were busy rebuilding those lives amid the ruins of their city.

But when the Western powers issued a new currency (the deutschmark) in their zones in the spring of 1948 with the aim of stabilizing the economy, the difficulties of four-power cooperation could no longer be ignored.

In the months prior to that, the Western powers had attempted to come to an agreement with the Soviet Military Administration (SMA) in negotiations on postwar Germany's political and economic structure.

After all attempts to set up a uniform economic and financial system for all of Germany had failed, the Western powers unilaterally introduced the deutschmark in their own zones on 20 June 1948 as the only valid currency. The new bills had been transported to Germany under absolute secrecy and then put into circulation. An exception was made for Greater Berlin, which was explicitly left out of the currency reform so as not to endanger joint four-power administration in the city.

The Soviet Military Administration now faced a dilemma. The millions of reichsmark and rentenmark bills in circulation in the Western occupation zones had been rendered worthless overnight, but they were still a valid means of payment in the

Soviet zone. That zone's economy would have come to a speedy collapse if it had been flooded with "old" bills from the Western zones.

The solution was obvious: the Soviet occupation zone needed its own currency. Since the Soviet Union had no bills waiting to be introduced as a new "ostmark" (Eastern mark), stickers similar to trading stamps were pasted on the old reichsmark and rentenmark bills, which the Soviets then introduced as the only valid currency as of 23 June 1948 (Order No. 117/SMA). And its validity expressly applied not only to the Soviet occupation zone, but to all of Greater Berlin.

The new ostmark's validity in Greater Berlin – in other words, also in the Western sectors – could not be tolerated by the three Western city commandants. They reacted promptly with an order issued on 23 June 1948 declaring the SMA's orders "null and void" and, in turn, extending the deutschmark's validity to Greater Berlin. Because of Berlin's special status, the bills issued in Berlin were stamped or perforated with a "B."

The Soviet Union's response was to cut off access to Berlin's Western sectors from the Western occupation zones starting at 6:00 a.m. on 24 June 1948.

A little-known fact, however, is that the Western powers – attempting to restore more or less normal relations in Berlin by negotiating with the Soviets – contemplated several actions that would have changed history. Had these ideas been realized, the political and economic development of Germany and Europe would have gone in a radically different direction.

In a joint directive issued on 30 August 1948 by the four (!) governments to their military governors in Berlin, the four (!) powers stipulated that:

(A) The recently imposed restrictions on traffic, transportation, and trade between Berlin and the Western occupation zones and from and to the Soviet zone were to be lifted.

(B) The Soviet zone's deutschmark was to be introduced as the only currency accepted in Berlin and the Western marks stamped with a "B" were to be taken out of circulation.

Had this directive gone into force, it would have had a profound impact on Germany's and Berlin's economic and political future.

At this late date, we probably will not be able to determine whether the Western allies were seriously considering this option or whether there were tactical reasons for the clause stipulating that the four military governors should confer until 7 September 1948 on the regulations necessary to carry out the directive, which would suggest that the Western allies were playing for time and never intended to follow through on it.

Or perhaps this directive from 30 August 1948 simply testifies to the uncertainties of a tense and dangerous time.

During and after World War II, the four victorious powers were united first and foremost by their desire to defeat Nazi Germany and to eliminate its potential to

disrupt international order. Division was not an explicit goal, but rather the consequence of a previously disregarded conflict between systems. This conflict did not become obvious until the victorious powers had reached their primary goal, and Berlin was the place where the clash was most severe.

The overall context of the events back then suggests that the Western allies, especially the U.S. general Lucius D. Clay, would have gone to great lengths to prevent this directive from becoming a reality. Clay was one of the advocates of a new view of the European situation. He felt that Soviet foreign policy was aggressive, and he was reluctant to back down. In the end, this position prevailed.

We can only speculate on the possible consequences of Berlin's exclusion from the West's deutschmark and inclusion in the Soviet zone's currency area, as the directive mandated. Without a doubt, the Cold War was a difficult and dangerous time and division was a deeply painful compromise – but one that was still preferable to a “hot war.”

In any case, the city's connection to the West – and, as a result, German reunification and European postwar development – hung by the proverbial thread in the days between 30 August and 7 September 1948.

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