

## Three Berlin Crises – The Airlift, the Wall and Checkpoint Charlie

### 1948: The Berlin blockade and airlift

From the beginning, West Berlin, marooned 100 miles inside East Germany, had needed special attention, and a stream of convoys from West Germany supplied it with food, fuel, and other staples. It was a thorn in the side for the Soviets, who saw West Berlin as an outpost for American spies and propaganda, and a tempting sanctuary for thousands of refugees.

Against Soviet protests, the U.S. and Britain pushed for greater economic collaboration between the zones, and on 1 January 1947 the two merged to form into the quasi-state of Bizone or [Bizonia](#), then added the French zone to create [Trizonia](#).

The Western allies also began preparation a currency reform to replace the de-valued Reichsmark with a new [Deutsche Mark](#), creating an economically stable western Germany. The Soviets opposed currency reform in keeping with their policy of a weak Germany. On 20 March 1948, after weeks of wrangling, Marshal [Vasily Sokolovsky](#) walked out of the ACC meeting of the Council, never to return. The Soviets refused to participate any longer in the quadripartite administration of Germany and of Berlin, installing a communist regime in East Berlin.

Truman later noted, "For most of Germany, this act merely formalized what had been an obvious fact for some time, namely, that the four-power control machinery had become unworkable. For the city of Berlin, however, this was the curtain-raiser for a major crisis."

On 25 March – five days after walking out of the ACC -- the Soviets issued orders restricting Western military and passenger traffic between the American, British and French occupation zones and Berlin. Berlin, an island 100 miles inside the Soviet zone – suddenly was cut off from the world. Allied military forces in the western sectors of Berlin numbered only about 23,000.

On 2 April, General Clay halted all military trains and required that military supplies be transported by air.

On 18 June, the new [Deutsche Mark](#) was announced. The next day Soviet guards halted all passenger trains and autobahn traffic, delayed Western and German freight shipments and required that all water transport secure special Soviet permission. West Berlin was now dependent on Soviet and East German supplies.

On 22 June, the Soviets announced their own new currency, the "Ostmark," as the exclusive currency of the Soviet zone.

By June 24, all road, river barge, and rail traffic had been halted, leaving West Berlin with about a month's supply of food and coal. But the Soviets could not close the air routes. In 1945, the four powers had agreed there would be three 23-mile-wide air corridors providing free access to Berlin. The only way to enforce the blockade would have been to shoot planes down.

On June 26, 1948, two days after the blockade began, Clay gave the order for the [Berlin Airlift](#), US and British planes were joined by the Canadian, Australian, New Zealand and South African air forces.

The Berlin Airlift appeared able to operate indefinitely. On 15 April 1949 the Soviets offered to talk, and the blockade was lifted at one minute after midnight on 12 May. A British convoy immediately drove through, and the first train reached Berlin at 5:32 a.m.

Flights continued, building up three months' worth of supplies just in case. The Berlin Airlift officially ended on 30 September 1949, after 15 months -- 324 days. The US and RAF delivered

2.3 million tons, two-thirds of it coal, on 278,228 flights, at a cost of about \$2.06 billion in today's dollars.

The C-47s and C-54s flew over 92 million miles, and at the height of the Airlift, one plane reached West Berlin every 30 seconds. Seventeen American and eight British aircraft crashed with 101 fatalities. They are honored at the famed Berlin Airlift memorial at Templehof.

General Clay received a [ticker-tape parade](#) in New York City, was invited to address Congress and was honored with a medal from President Truman. Clay made occasional return trips to Berlin where he was lionized by crowds in the hundreds of thousands. A street in an upscale neighborhood bears his name: Clayallee.

Templehof was closed in 2008 but opened in 2010 as Berlin's largest public park. Entrance is free. Its wide open spaces are used for recreation and fairs. About 80% of the airfield was an important habitat for endangered birds, plants and insects, and park usage is restricted to protect the habitats.

Throughout the airlift and afterward, the Western Allies exercised authority in their sectors. However, city affairs were managed by the [West Berlin Senate](#) and [House of Representatives](#), chosen by free elections. Representatives of the city participated as non-voting members in the West German Parliament. Some West German agencies had permanent seats in the city. The allies carefully consulted with the West German and West Berlin governments on questions involving unification and the status of Berlin.

### **August 1961: The Wall**

By July 1961, about 3.5 million East Germans had defected to the West, many by crossing the open border from East Berlin into West Berlin and then traveling to West Germany and other Western European countries. In 1958, Nikita Khrushchev had demanded that the Western allies withdraw from Berlin and that it be turned into a "demilitarized free city." The allies ignored his threat.

On Aug. 13, 1961, just past midnight trucks with soldiers and construction workers rumbled through East Berlin. The crews began tearing up streets, dug holes for concrete posts, and strung barbed wire all along the border between East and West Berlin and cut telephone wires between the two sectors.

Berliners were shocked. No longer could East Berliners cross the border for operas, plays, soccer games, or cross into West Berlin for well-paying jobs. No longer could families, friends, and lovers cross the border to meet their loved ones.

The Berlin Wall stretched over a 100 miles, through the center of the city and around its borders, entirely cutting West Berlin off from the rest of East Germany. The wall went through four transformations – first a barbed-wire fence with concrete posts, then concrete blocks topped with barbed wire, then a concrete wall, supported by steel girders and finally concrete slabs 12-feet high.

The barrier included guard towers and, after houses were razed, a wide "death strip" with anti-vehicle trenches and raked sand or gravel, aiding in detection of trespassers and also enabling officers to detect negligent guards. Between 1961 and 1989, 5,000 people attempted to escape over the wall, with estimates of the resulting death toll varying between 100 and 200.

The Wall was officially referred to as the "[Anti-Fascist](#) Protection Rampart" needed to protect its population from fascist elements conspiring to prevent the "will of the people" in building a [socialist state](#) in East Germany. In practice, the Wall served to prevent the massive [emigration and defection](#) that marked Germany and the communist Eastern Bloc during the post-World War II period. The West Berlin city government sometimes referred to it as the "[Wall of Shame](#)"—a term coined by Mayor [Willy Brandt](#)

West Germans and citizens of other Western countries could in general visit East Germany. Visas for day trips restricted to East Berlin were issued at border crossings.

In 1963, a four-power agreement permitted 1.2 West Berliners to visit the East during the Christmas season. Similar, very limited arrangements were made in 1964, 1965 and 1966. In 1971, West Berliners were allowed to apply for visas to enter East Berlin and East Germany regularly.

East Berliners and East Germans could at first not travel to West Berlin or West Germany at all. Over the years several exceptions were made for: Elderly pensioners; visits for important family matters; professional reasons (artists, truck drivers, musicians). Citizens of other East European countries were in general subject to the same terms.

Allied military personnel and civilian officials of the Allied forces could enter and exit East Berlin freely. Likewise, Soviet military patrols could enter and exit West Berlin. Since Allied policy did not recognize the authority of the GDR, elaborate procedures were established to prevent inadvertent recognition of East German authority.

#### *Denouement*

On June 26, 1963, President Kennedy visited the city on June 26 and in his famous "Ich bin ein Berliner" speech in front of the Schöneberg Town Hall assured the people of Berlin of his solidarity with them.

On June 12, 1987, in a speech at the [Brandenburg Gate](#) commemorating the 750th anniversary of [Berlin](#), President Reagan challenged Gorbachev to "Tear down this wall!" as a symbol of Gorbachev's desire for increasing freedom in the [Eastern Bloc](#).

In 1989 as [liberalization](#) swept the Eastern Bloc's authoritarian systems and the erosion of political power in nearby [Poland](#) and [Hungary](#). After several weeks of civil unrest, the East German government announced on 9 November 1989 that all GDR citizens could visit West Germany and West Berlin. Crowds of East Germans crossed and climbed onto the wall, joined by West Germans on the other side in a celebratory atmosphere. Over the next few weeks, a euphoric public and souvenir hunters chipped away parts of the wall; the governments later used industrial equipment to remove most of the rest. The fall of the Berlin Wall paved the way for [German reunification](#).

#### **October 1961: The standoff at Checkpoint Charlie**

For 16 hours from the 27 to 28 October 1961, US and Soviet tanks faced each other in divided Berlin and the two superpowers came closer to kicking off a third world war than in any other cold-war confrontation, bar the Cuban missile crisis a year later.

In August 1961 Washington and its British and French allies had failed to prevent the Russians building the [Berlin Wall](#). And by October, East German officials had begun to deny US diplomats the unhindered access to East Berlin that was part of the agreement with Moscow on the postwar occupation of [Germany](#).

Then, on 22 October, a senior US diplomat in West Berlin was stopped by East German border guards on his way to the state opera house in East Berlin. They demanded to see his passport, which he insisted only Soviet officials had the right to check. He was forced to turn back.

General Clay, hero of the 1948-49 Berlin Airlift, had been sent to deal with the Wall issue. Clay pugnaciously now ordered American M48 tanks to head for Checkpoint Charlie. There they stood, some 75 meters from the border, noisily racing their engines and sending plumes of black smoke into the night air. Moscow sent an equal number of Russian T55 tanks rumbling to face down the Americans.

Kennedy opened a back channel with the Kremlin and after 16 hours the Soviets pulled back one of their T55s; minutes later an American M48 also left the scene.

From that point on, the western allies freely dispatched diplomats and military personnel to attend the opera and theatre in East Berlin. Soviet diplomats, too, attended functions in West Berlin and sent Volga limousines packed with Soviet military police on patrol to West Berlin. The elaborate routine was faithfully observed until the Wall fell in November 1989.