

Berlin Airlift Background



Directions: Read the passage and answer the questions on the next page.

Post war Germany was divided into three sections--the Allied part was controlled by the United States, Great Britain and France and other part by the Soviet Union. The city of Berlin, although located in the eastern Soviet half, was also divided into four sectors --West Berlin occupied by Allied interests and East Berlin occupied by Soviets. In June 1948, the Soviet Union attempted to control all of Berlin by cutting surface traffic to and from the city of West Berlin. Starving out the population and cutting off their business was their method of gaining control. The Truman administration reacted with a continual daily airlift which brought much needed food and supplies into the city of West Berlin. This Air Bridge to Berlin lasted until the end of September of 1949---although on May 12, 1949; the Soviet government yielded and lifted the blockade.

When the airlift began, there were only two airfields in Berlin; Tempelhof with one runway in the US sector and Gatow with one runway in the British sector. In 1945, when the Americans arrived in Berlin, Tempelhof's lone runway was sodded and had been used only for small aircraft and fighters during the latter stages of World War II.

On July 5, the first British Sunderland flying boat participating in the airlift landed on the Havel Lake in Berlin. Soon ten of these planes from the Royal Air Force Coastal Command were shuttling between Hamburg and Berlin. On July 7, the first twenty C-54s to carry coal to Berlin landed at Tempelhof. By July 15, the US effort numbered 54 C-54s and 104 C-47s making runs to Berlin. The combined US-British tonnage being flown into Berlin was averaging around 2,500 tons in over 600 daily flights. It was still short of the 4,500 tons established by the planners as the daily minimum requirement to feed and support the Allied military and Berlin civilian population, but a marvelous achievement in such a short period of time.

As it became more apparent that the Soviets had no intention of lifting the blockade and that the airlift was going to last more than a few weeks, it became clear that the airlift would have to be expanded and that operations at all levels would have to become more efficient. The romanticism would have to be sacrificed for standard procedures if the airlift was to have any chance for success through the fall and winter months.

The first month of the Soviet blockade and the Allied airlift brought anxiety and change to the lives of Berliners residing in the three Western Sectors. Although they had become accustomed to spending most of their waking hours seeking food and shelter, they now had to cope with the possible loss of their freedom if they identified too closely with the Western powers and the Western powers decided to pull out. As Ernst Reuter had predicted, the Berliners were prepared to make sacrifices for their political freedom. They demonstrated their determination throughout the 11 month ordeal in spite of Communist intimidation and harassment which eventually led to the split of their city.

During the first weeks, the Berliners had to learn how to cope with dehydrated potatoes, powdered milk for infants, a lack of fresh fruit, vegetables, and meat, a dual currency system, reduced electrical power requiring severe rationing, and loss of jobs because of restricted power which forced many factories and offices to close. They also had to deal with the subways, elevated trains, buses and streetcars operating on reduced schedules because of gas and electric rationing. In short, every phase of what they had become accustomed to as normal daily routine was disrupted. They were forced to adapt to survive.

Fortunately, the average Berliner had grown accustomed to rationing and shortages during six years of war and three years of occupation. The ordeal of the blockade was an additional burden, but it may have been more difficult to overcome had the Berliners not been accustomed to hardships.

One of the most severe problems faced by the Berliners was the lack of sufficient electrical power sources in the Western Sectors. Upon commencement of the blockade, this required immediate and strict rationing for homes, factories, offices, and transportation services. Family home life soon became regulated around when electric power was available. For most, this was two hours a day and staggered over the 24 hour period. Schedules were printed and, depending on district of residence, some Berliners were forced to get up at 2 am to accomplish tasks, such as cooking requiring electrical power. Lack of electrical power caused many factories to close, increasing the unemployment rolls. Even when goods could be manufactured they could not be exported because of the blockade.

In spite of these hardships, the Berliners demonstrated their political independence by continual challenge to Soviet pressure. The Berlin City Council passed a resolution on June 30, requesting the United Nations mediate the dispute between the occupying powers. On July 11, at the Schoeneberg District Hall in the US Sector, Reuter condemned the Soviet blockade and reiterated the unshakeable will of the Berliners to resist an attempt to starve them into political submission. On Thursday, July 29, the City Council, meeting at its regular location in the Soviet Sector, courageously passed a resolution demanding the blockade be lifted. Its instigators were charged with a "crime against humanity." Frustrated that their blockade had failed to push the West out of their territory, the Soviets eventually relented and opened the roads back into Berlin on May 12 1949, , relieving the long suffering citizens of the city.

1. What were the four sections of Germany?
2. Why did the Berlin Airlift begin?
3. How long did the Berlin Airlift last?
4. Why couldn't the people of Berlin openly show their support of the Western effort?
5. What were some of the hardships that the people of Berlin had to face from 1948-1949?
6. Who did the City Council ask for help to end the Blockade?