

'Blockade and diplomacy' from Le Monde (11 July 1948)

Caption: A few days after the start of the Berlin Blockade on 24 June 1948, the French newspaper Le Monde analyses the possible consequences of the blockade on the continuing talks between the Soviet Union, the United States and the United Kingdom on the quadripartite occupation of the city.

Source: Le Monde. dir. de publ. BEUVE-MÉRY, Hubert. 11.-12.07.1948, n° 1 075. Paris: Le Monde. "Blocus et diplomatie", p. 1.

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Last updated: 06/07/2016

Blockade and diplomacy

The American, British and French memoranda on the Berlin Blockade, which have just been published, differ only in form. All three emphasise that Berlin is not a part of the Soviet Zone. The quadripartite occupation is founded on an agreement between the four occupying powers, confirmed by long practice, and does not damage the interests of any of them.

That agreement has been violated by the Soviet military government which has suspended communications, thereby depriving two million Berliners of their normal supplies. It has put an end to the Kommandantura meetings and introduced the Eastern Zone's currency in the international zone of Berlin.

The Soviet action has created a very serious situation (the American memorandum calls it 'intolerable'), one which has forced the Western governments to declare that they will not give in to threats and pressure and to demand that the differences be resolved by negotiations under Article 33 of the United Nations Charter.

One important detail does not appear in the French memorandum, France not having taken part in the exchange to which it refers. In accordance with the Yalta Agreement, at the end of hostilities, American and British troops occupied Saxony and Thuringia, which today form part of the Soviet Zone. In a message to Marshal Stalin on 14 June 1945, President Truman offered to withdraw American forces to the existing zonal boundaries provided 'satisfactory arrangements could be entered into between the military commanders which would give access by rail, road and air to United States forces in Berlin'.

An exchange of letters along the same lines took place between Mr Churchill and Marshal Stalin, who accepted the proposed exchange. For it is on the basis of an exchange that the occupation of Berlin, initially Soviet, has become quadripartite: a disadvantageous exchange for the Western powers, as it lost them Thuringia and Saxony, which have eight million inhabitants, and shifted the border of the American Zone three hundred kilometres westwards.

Has reference to this deal, however interesting it may be, anything other than historical value? It appears that some Berliners fear that the Western powers might swap the city for the provinces that they had once occupied. Such an operation does not seem probable, although it is true that the Soviets have imposed the Blockade on the basis that might is right: if they felt themselves capable of winning the game by cutting all communications, why would they be prepared to pay for the exclusive possession of Berlin?

The three Allied memoranda suggested four-party negotiations, to take place in Berlin upon resumption of normal traffic. It would be surprising if such a demand was accepted, since it has been rejected hitherto whenever put forward by the military commanders. General Sokolovski could act upon only the orders of his government, which would have had to change its mind.

A way out might be found by attributing the interruption in traffic to 'technical problems'. The Soviet Embassy in Washington would emphasise the seriousness of these technical problems, which would prevent access by road and the operation of the railways and waterways. We are convinced that diplomacy could sort out the technical problems, but under certain conditions.

The reference to the United Nations included in the three Allied memoranda was not made to impress Moscow, where it is known that use of the veto can sabotage any kind of international action. The Allies would be wrong to bring the affair to that forum. Neither would they achieve success by restricting the discussion to Berlin. The path of negotiations will only succeed by enlarging the debate, extending it to all Germany and perhaps even further. This will happen after a few delays and some sabre-rattling similar to what we have seen today.