

'The fight for Germany' from Il nuovo Corriere della Sera (1 July 1948)


Caption: On 1 July 1948, the Italian newspaper Il nuovo Corriere della Sera explains how the Berlin Blockade fits into the scheme of the Cold War and considers the fate of Germany.

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The fight for Germany

The 'cold war' being fought out in these days in Berlin is not simply a fight, as someone said, for a hundred-mark note or, to put it another way, to impose the 'Sokolowsky mark' as legal tender throughout the quadripartite city, or the western mark as legal tender in three of the city's zones and the 'Sokolowsky mark' in the other. Nor is it just a struggle for control of the city. There is little doubt that the Russians would like to drive the Western Allies out of Berlin, and the Western Allies would like to stay there at all costs. The mark and Berlin itself are not, however, the only stakes in play. Higher and more important stakes are on the table: Germany or, to use the words of *The Economist*, 'the soul of Germany'. The Western Allies cannot hope to create a united western Europe strong enough to withstand outside pressures unless they can rely on Germany's cooperation. Nor can Russia hope to conquer Europe unless it can rely on Germany's cooperation. This contest began at Potsdam and, up to now, the bargaining chips have been bread from the West and propaganda from the Russians: the West gave food to millions and millions of Germans and the Russians, after severing East Germany for their own and Poland's benefit, removed industrial plant by way of reparations; they removed machinery and workers, but offered the German people a magical promise: German unity. The 'Six's plan' for the reorganisation of West Germany has precipitated events. The Russians are accusing the West of breaching the Potsdam Agreement with the London Programme and are saying that the four-way government of Berlin is finished. A crucial trial of strength is now under way in Berlin. The British and the Americans have a characteristic and expressive term for that point in the game when one of the players forces his opponent to reveal what he has in his hand: the 'show-down'. The 'show-down' has been reached in Berlin. Whichever of the two parties backs down or withdraws will lose prestige or, as they say in the East, 'will lose face'. Prestige is not a matter of national vanity or pride. If the Western Allies were to withdraw from Berlin, the Berliners, who have up to now fought against the Communists, would be left to the mercy of their enemies, just as the liberals and democrats of Rumania, Poland, Hungary and elsewhere were abandoned at Yalta. After that, what possible faith could the German people continue to have in the power and resolve of the Western Allies?

Three years ago, the fight for control of Germany began in the worst possible way for the Communists. The Germans' enmity towards the Slavs has deep-seated roots in history.

The whole German people was anti-Communist.

The Potsdam Agreement was probably, however, the worst settlement that a coalition of victors has ever imposed on a loser. Compared with Potsdam, the — much maligned, albeit largely wrongly — Treaty of Versailles was a monument of level-headedness and reason. With its agricultural land reduced by a quarter and its industry reduced by half, Germany, or rather what was left of Germany, would have had to support a population swollen by 10 to 12 million German refugees and outcasts from East Prussia, Silesia, the other territories of East Germany, Czechoslovakia and the Balkans. As *The Economist* said at the time: 'The Potsdam settlement will not last ten years and, when it collapses, international anarchy will be poised on a knife edge between civilisation and the atomic bomb.' So far it has lasted less than three years, and on the day on which the three Western powers and the three Benelux governments have managed, after weeks of difficult discussions and negotiations, to agree on a reorganisation plan for West Germany to replace the absurd Potsdam settlement, the world is indeed poised between peace and war, between 'civilisation and the atomic bomb'.

The London Programme makes provision for a West German government and international control of the Ruhr. Its purpose is to bring about a revival of West Germany's major industry for the benefit of the German people and Europe.

It makes no appeal, however, to German nationalism. An American newspaper — the *Baltimore Sun* — has defined it in negative terms: 'What our plan is not'. The plan seems to be accepting the division of Germany, whereas Germans of all political colours want unity. The military occupation authorities will have the last word on many vital issues, whereas Germans of all colours want Germany to be governed by Germans and an end to the humiliation of the military occupation. The initiative for setting up a constituent assembly will lie with the various *Laender*, whereas many Germans want to be reassured by a strong central government.

Under the Programme, the Ruhr is to be internationalised, whereas the Germans want the Ruhr to be in their hands alone and to work for them alone. As a trade union leader has said: 'How hard do you think our miners will work when they know that other countries are to take the coal that they mine?' Nor does it seem, although it may be too early to judge, that the proposals that Ernest Bevin made yesterday in his speech substantially change the situation.

It is precisely to German nationalism that the plan launched by the Warsaw Conference appeals: German unity, creation of a German government for Germany as a whole, withdrawal of all occupying forces. In the case of the Ruhr, Russia is proposing four-way control, i.e. it wants to play its part in controlling that huge arsenal; it is not, however, offering the Western Allies the opportunity to play their part in controlling the industry of Silesia. By way of reparations, it wants measures to ensure that the Germans will fulfil their obligations; this point may leave a 'bitter taste' in the mouth of the German people. The most extraordinary paradox is the defence of German unity. Russia severed Germany from German territories, taking one part itself and assigning the rest to Poland. After which it starts to champion German unity. Rather like promising personal safety to someone after amputating both their legs.

This contest to conquer the 'soul of Germany' may well be driven by two fears, two parallel or, if you prefer, contrary fears. The Russians fear that West Germany, if reorganised under the aegis of American power, will immediately aspire to liberate not only what is now the Soviet occupation zone, but all the German territories taken by Russia and Poland, i.e. that it will aspire to unify Germany *against* Russia. The West fears that the Russians are seeking German unity so that they can then have any government that comes to the fore, which would undoubtedly be weak, overturned by their 'fifth column', as in Prague. That they want to unify Germany *against* the West. After which Germany would be a satellite of Russia: a gigantic satellite likely to cause a serious shift in the balance of power.

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