


The Berlin Blockade

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The Berlin Blockade

Germany rapidly became a sparring ground for the Cold War. After having politically reorganised their occupation zones in defeated Germany, the British and Americans wanted to revive the German economy, which implied radical monetary reform. On 20 June 1948, the Western Allies introduced a new unit of account. The German mark, the *Deutsche Mark* (DM), was introduced in all the Western zones and replaced the *Reichsmark*, which had lost all its value. This monetary reform enabled the shops to be filled once again with goods that had, until then, only been obtainable on the black market. While the Communists took over nearly all the command posts in the Eastern zone, the ideas of the former Allies about the economic and political organisation of Germany became more at odds with each other every day.

Hoping to keep Berlin united in the heart of the Soviet zone, and denouncing what it called the Anglo-American policy of acting without consultation, the USSR reacted to this initiative on 24 June 1948 by imposing a total blockade of the Western sectors of Berlin. The city lay in the Soviet zone, but the Americans, the British and the French were established in their respective occupation zones. Access to Berlin by road, rail and water was impossible until 12 May 1949. Food supplies and electricity were cut. The introduction of the DM in the Western sectors of Berlin was the official cause, but the Soviet Union probably wanted to capture the capitalist island in its occupation zone by making the British, French and Americans leave Berlin. The latter reacted swiftly: the Allied airlift, introduced by General Lucius D. Clay, was to be the appropriate American counter-measure.

Each day, thousands of aircraft (more than 270 000 flights in total) brought food, fuel and other essential goods to the beleaguered city. In all, over 13 000 tonnes of goods were delivered every day. Berlin became one of the main theatres of confrontation between East and West. The division of Europe into two blocs was confirmed. The city became a symbol of freedom for the West. The inhabitants of the city were no longer thought of as former Nazis to be punished but as victims of the Soviet threat. When Stalin decided to lift the blockade on 12 May 1949, the political division of the city was firmly established. Two municipal administrations were put in place, and the Soviets began to merge the Social Democratic and Communist Parties. In contrast, democratic elections were held in West Berlin in December 1948. The outcome was a victory for the anti-Communist Social Democratic Party. The success of the Berlin Airlift enabled Western opinion to accept the inevitable partition of Germany. On either side of the Iron Curtain, the divided city of Berlin became the showcase for the Western and Soviet models. Confronted with the Soviet threat, the idea of German rearmament and the country's integration into a united European structure became more and more vital in Western eyes.