"THE AIRLIFT HAS BECOME A SYMBOL OF HOPE."

GEN. LUCIUS D. CLAY, U.S. MILITARY GOVERNOR OF GERMANY, 1947-1949

Photo by Henry Ries

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Berliners watch the landing of a Candy bomber at Tempelhof Airport, 1948.

After the surrender of the Third Reich in 1945, the four victorious powers – the U.S., the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and France – occupied Germany and divided the country into four zones of occupation, a process agreed upon at the preceding war conferences.

Berlin received a special status: Although the former capital of the Reich was located within the Soviet Zone of Occupation, it was also divided into four sectors. For the Western powers, the U.S., Britain, and France, this meant that they had to administer their respective sectors in the city far away from their zones of occupation in Western Germany. Joint administration by the victorious powers worked reasonably well in 1945 and 1946. In the two years that followed, however, the differences of opinion became increasingly pronounced. They could not agree on a shared policy towards Germany. The idea of a Communist social order supported by the Soviet Union was incompatible with the democratic values of the Western powers. The Cold War in Germany began.

The Cold War

Significance: The Cold War was a global conflict in which the West under the leadership of the U.S. struggled for world supremacy against the Soviet Union and the Eastern Block it dominated. It was above all ideologically, economically, and technologically driven. Militarily, the competition between both blocs fueled an unprecedented arms race and escalated in numerous proxy wars.

A failed joint attempt at currency reform in Germany by the four victorious powers in the summer of 1948 provided the catalyst for the Berlin Blockade. In late June, the Soviet occupying power blocked access from the Western zones of occupation to West Berlin, by road, water, and rail.

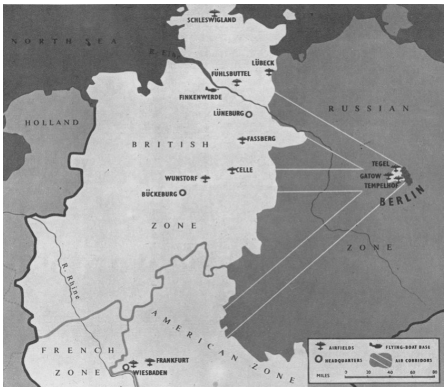
OPERATION AIRLIFT

For the Western powers there was no question of a withdrawal. (See statement by Lucius D. Clay). A military reaction was just as unlikely, because of the danger of escalation and a wider war was too great. The Western powers assumed that the Soviet Union would also not go so far as to risk a war. Thus, they decided that they would use the air corridor contractually agreed upon with the Soviet Union as a means of setting up an airlift.

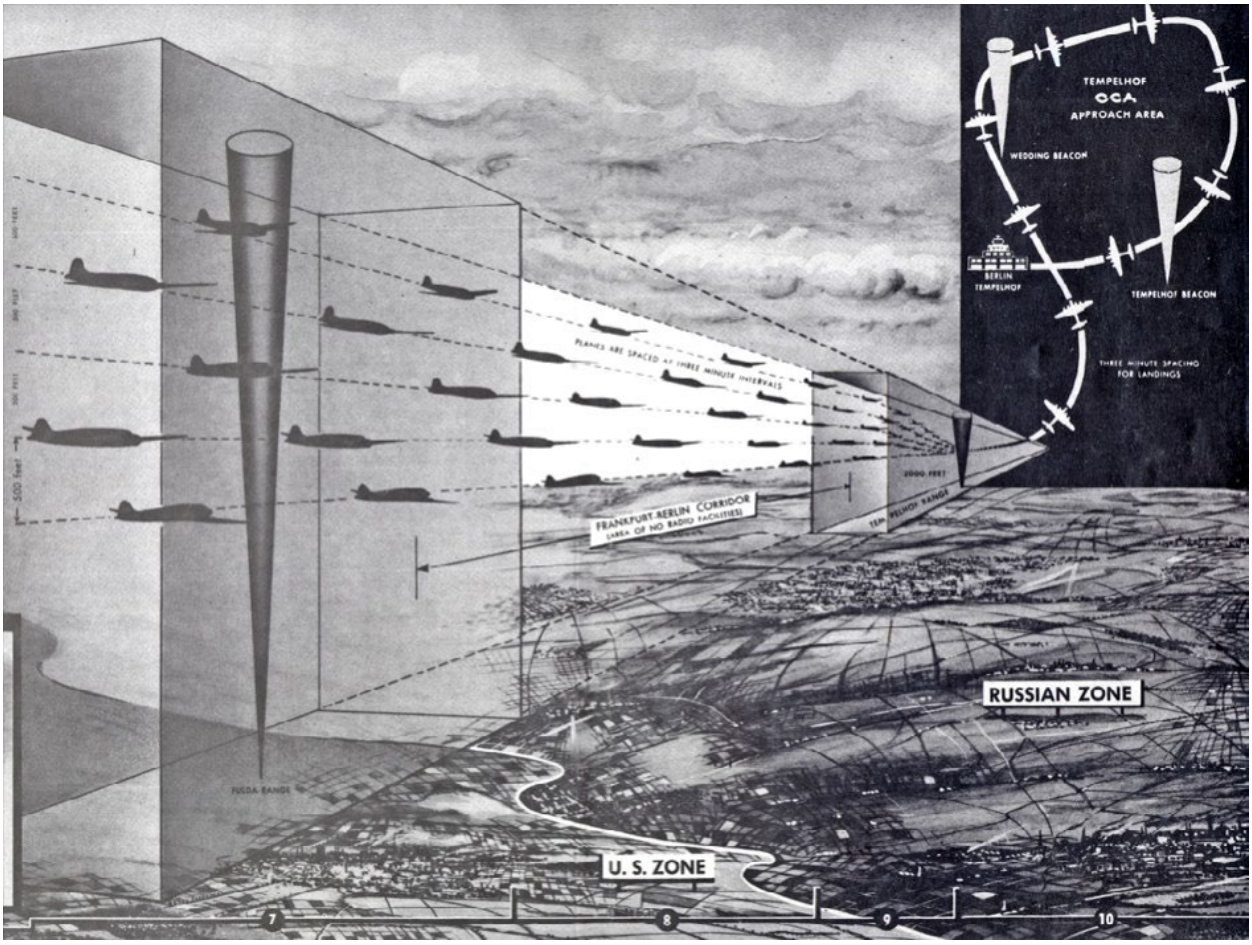
The U.S, Great Britain, and France realized that they would have to withdraw their troops from the city, if they did not succeed in securing supplies for their own troops and the population of Berlin. A withdrawal from Berlin would have far-reaching international consequences, as ***General Lucius D. Clay*** made clear:

"Why are we in Europe? We have lost Czechoslovakia. We have lost Finland. Norway is threatened. … After Berlin, will come Western Germany…. If we mean that we are to hold Europe against communism, we must not budge." (April 1948)

Since the governments in Washington, London and Paris did not want to respond with military intervention, their only option was a daring plan: to supply the city exclusively from the air via the three existing corridors. The American and British supply flights left for West Berlin from nine airfields in the Western zones of occupation. Some 2.3 million inhabitants had to be provided with 1,500 calories a day each.

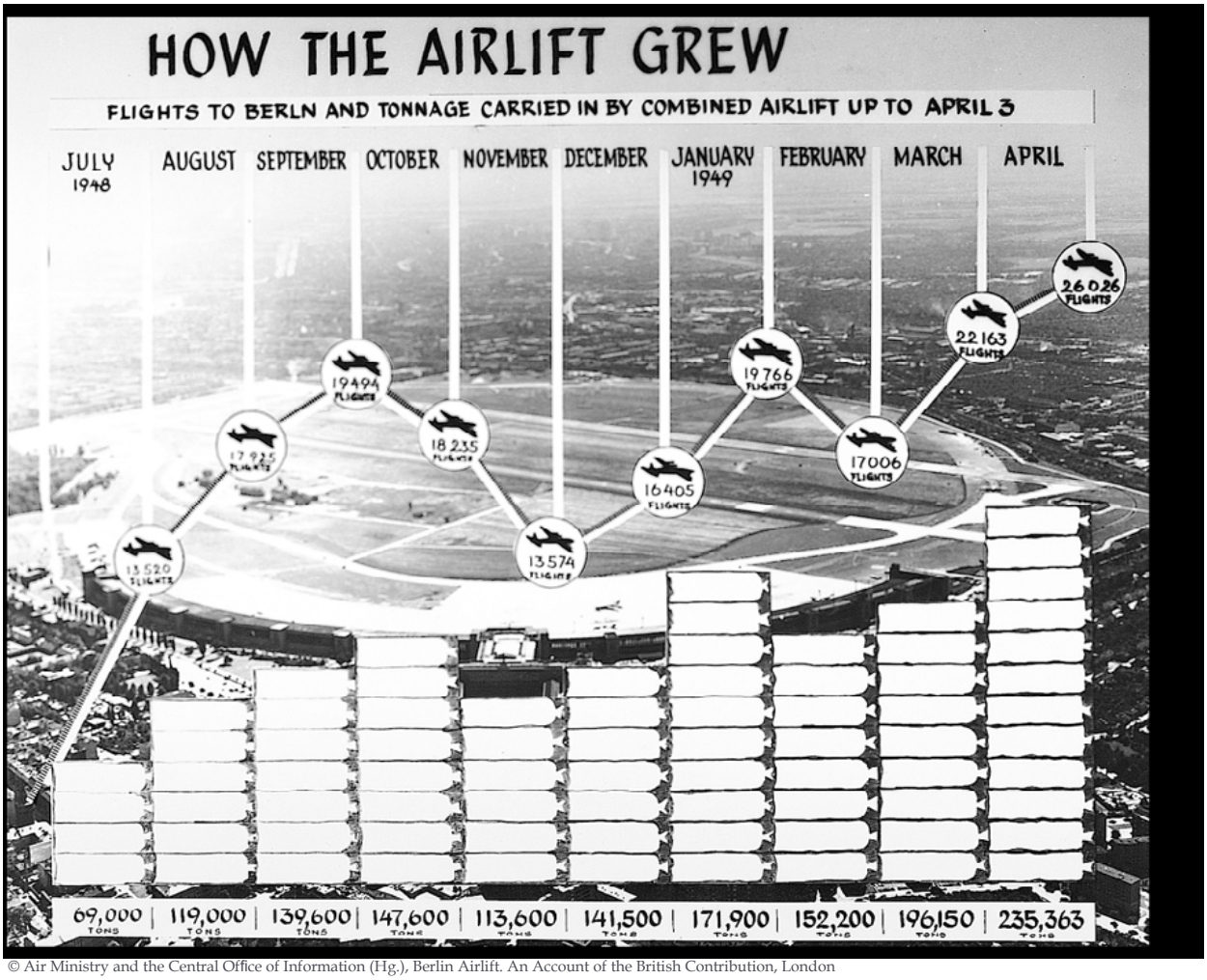


A Question of Organization



Visualization of the corridor between Frankfurt Main and Berlin during the Berlin Airlift.

The Berlin Airlift was essentially carried out by the US Air Force and the British Royal Air Force. During the first few weeks a lack of transport planes and experience with airlifts proved problematic. The appointment of US Lieutenant General William H. Tunner as commander of the American and British transport fleet marks the beginning of the success story of “Operation Vittles.” Tunner planned the logistics while the US military governor in Germany General Lucius D. Clay was responsible for political support and additional aircraft.



Freight tonnage flown to Berlin between July 1948 and April 1949.

CARE package distribution station in Berlin Dahlem in the American sector, 1948/49.

The Berlin Airlift in a nutshell

The success of the logistically demanding operation "Airlift to Berlin" can also be measured by the number of flights and the amount of goods flown in. Here are figures collected by the “Stiftung Luftbrueckendank” and from the book “The Air Force Can Deliver Anything” by Daniel F. Harrington.

Tonnage in US short tons (1 short ton = 907 kilograms)

Coal	1.586.530 T
Food	538.016 T
Miscellaneous	2.325.809 T
Passengers to Berlin	59.031
Passengers from Berlin	225.706
Outbound and return flights	555.370
First airlift flight with goods for Berliners	28 June 1948
Last airlift flight	6 October 1949
Highest tonnage in 24 hours	12.490 T
Highest number of flights in 24 hours	1.398
Fatalities during the airlift	86

Sources

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“The Air Force Can Deliver Anything:” Harrington, Daniel. *The Air Force Can Deliver Anything.* U.S. Air Force Europe Office of History. Defense.gov, media.defense.gov/2018/Jan/24/2001869016/-1/-1/1/The%20Air%20Force%20Can%20Deliver%20Anything%20a%20History%20of%20the%20Berlin%20Airlift.PDF

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