

Feed a City, Change a Country

The memory of the Airlift is still alive in Berlin, but the number of contemporary witnesses is declining. The anniversary is a good occasion to refresh those memories, because this is about more than nostalgia.

For the allies, it was an Anglo-American twin victory. For Berlin and the Berliners, it was a social-democratic record performance. It has influenced Germany's history to this very day.

Whoever can still recall the Airlift from their own experience had to have been at least a schoolchild in 1948 and is now drawing their pension. It's no wonder the memory of the Airlift is gradually fading among the people of Berlin. To this comes the fact that, in the almost twenty years since the Wall fell, 1.6 million new people have moved into the city, whilst just as many have moved out. Actual contemporary witnesses are, today, just a small minority.

Thus, the overriding memory of the Airlift, for the many who were not there, is the towering achievement of the allied pilots. But there is a comparably important achievement from the Berlin side. In the three years since the war ended in 1945, there had been numerous disputes between the four powers

over Berlin. But it was the currency reform of June, 1948, that Stalin used to mount the blockade to drive the western powers out of the city. Why? Because it was clear that currency reform would bring the market economy with it.

Stalin had already tried two years earlier to prevent that, from the inside. Then, in 1946, he made the communist party in the Soviet zone absorb the much older and much bigger mother party, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and trim its sails to "overcoming" the market economy. The SPD in the western sector of Berlin resisted forced unification within an anti-capitalist party of "Socialist Unity" (SED).

Under their legendary mayors, Ernst Reuter and later Willy Brandt, the SPD in Berlin remained an independent party, rejecting the planned economy. In 1948 it supported the introduction of the German Mark. When Stalin reacted by introducing the blockade of the land routes, it ensured the success on the ground of the supply by air. With its vote for the German

Mark, the SPD ensured that the Berlin working class had a share in the German "Economic Miracle," the Wirtschaftswunder. In 1959, the SPD cements its contribution to the epochal growth in economic prosperity through the social market economy in the Godesberg Manifesto.

It was the social democrats who organized the Airlift on the Berlin side, like no other political force in the city. They knew what would come their way if the Soviets were to take over the western sectors, too. No to forced unification and blockade, Yes to the German Mark and Airlift – they stand together and are the shaping influences upon which post-war social democracy has evolved as the decisive champion of the open society, of political and economic pluralism.

In this way, the Berlin Airlift was not only a logistical masterpiece: it is the reason why Germany has also become the flourishing country of today. Because 60 years ago, its oldest political party (known as the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands since 1890, its roots reach back to 1863, the time of the American Civil War) allied itself with the Americans and British to merge social market economics and political democracy into a unitary whole, in both theory and real life, as no socialist party has ever managed before. Thus, commemorating the Airlift is inseparably linked with the memory of a time in which the SPD laid the foundation for its great political successes and Germany received the ground plan of its living stability.



*A Candy Bomber
at Tempelhof Airport.*