

How the Airlift Changed the World

The exemplary work of the U.S.- and Royal Air Force and the determination of the people of Berlin enjoy worldwide respect. But the Airlift was much more than just feeding the starving | By Rainer Bieling

If we take a close look at the when and where-for of this highlight of Anglo-American post-war politics in Germany we can recognize an epochal turning point for Europe in the 20th century.

It's the year 1948 and we're looking back 30 years earlier. February 1917: With a large popular uprising, the Russians overthrow the Tsarist monarchy and, in the middle of the war, establish a democratic republic. October 1917: Just nine months later, a communist coup led by Lenin and Trotsky abolishes democracy in Russia and ushers in the establishment of the "Dictatorship of the Proletariat."

Communist parties now form throughout the world, create the revolutionary Communist International, known as the Comintern, and attempt to overthrow "capitalism" (the market economy) and "bourgeois" democracy in every country.

In Europe, this leads to a polarization of totalitarian forces on the left and right, which then grind down the bourgeois and working-class democratic parties trapped between them. Soon, almost the entire continent is in the hands of the right, which, for its part, abolishes democracy and establishes dictatorships. Most aggressive are the Italian fascists and the German National Socialists, who soon form an axis with Japan and drag the world into devastating conflict, World War II.



Rainer Bieling, a Berlin-based journalist and conceptual designer of digital media, specializes in identifying the historic roots of present-day conflicts and their impact on future solutions. He was Made in Berlin during the summer of joy which followed the Airlift's victory over Stalin's blockade.

The one remaining democracy in Europe (alongside the neutral Switzerland and Sweden), Great Britain, defends itself ferociously and, in alliance with the United States, prevails. Together with the Soviet Union, which has meanwhile also been attacked by the Third Reich, the allies finally defeat Germany and, a bit later, Japan. But this does not usher in peace.

Throughout central Europe, where the Red Army has replaced the Wehrmacht as the occupying power, the communists establish dictatorships along Russian lines. In 1946, Winston Churchill described the situation in a speech that has become famous:

"From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic an Iron Curtain has descended

across the Continent. Behind that line lie all the capitals of the ancient states of Central and Eastern Europe. Warsaw, Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade, Bucharest and Sofia; all these famous cities and the populations around them lie in what I must call the Soviet sphere."

But the Iron Curtain has a hole in it: the western sectors of Berlin. The Soviet Union wants to close this hole with all its might. The Cold War, which now follows, is the Cold War for West Berlin. In June 1948 it threatens to become hot.

In order to re-establish a market economy in the western sectors of Berlin, too, the Allies organize the simultaneous introduction of the Deutschmark in all their occupation zones – the basis of the later "Wirtschaftswunder," or "Economic Miracle." Stalin knows immediately: a democratic and market economy-oriented oasis in the center of his dictatorial and planned economic desert would be like a black hole that swallows up communism and never spits it out (exactly as would later happen). So he orders a blockade of the land routes to West Berlin. But the air way is open. The U.S. and Great Britain use it. They supply the city for almost a whole year solely by air. The Soviet Union gives up. It will never get its hands on West Berlin. On November 9, 1989 the Wall falls.

The Iron Curtain rises, and take a look: Dictatorship and the planned economy disappear, Europe is once again united, and almost everywhere people opt for democracy and the market economy, in freedom and peace.