

AMERICAN RESPONSE TO THE BERLIN BLOCKADE - 1948

Below are two sets of sources that created the dilemma for the Americans as to how they should react to the Soviet blockade of Berlin in 1948.

SET 1: RESPOND!

SOURCE A

Telegram, dated June 25, 1948, by Alfred M. Bingham, et al. to President Harry S. Truman [Bingham was chairman of the American Association for a Democratic Germany. He and his co-authors were prominent liberals whose support Truman believed would be important in the upcoming 1948 presidential election.]

RUSSIAN EFFORTS TO DRIVE WESTERN POWERS FROM BERLIN ARE A CRUCIAL CHALLENGE TO AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY. SURRENDER WOULD DELIVER TO RUSSIAN VENGEANCE TWO MILLION GERMANS WHO HAVE DEFIED COMMUNIST TOTALITARIANISM. THERE ARE DISTURBING RUMORS OF PLANS TO EVACUATE BERLIN BECAUSE OF RUSSIAN BLOCKADE AGAINST GERMAN CIVILIAN SUPPLIES. ESSENTIAL SUPPLIES FOR THE GERMAN POPULATION CAN BE DELIVERED BY AIR AND IF NECESSARY MUST BE AT WHATEVER COST. WE URGE YOU TO MAKE THIS COUNTRY'S POSITION UNMISTAKABLE BY DECLARING THAT UNDER ALL CIRCUMSTANCES SHORT OF WAR WE WILL REMAIN IN BERLIN AND MAINTAIN SUPPLIES FOR THE CIVILIAN POPULATION. NOTHING LESS CAN ADEQUATELY REASSURE DEMOCRATIC FORCES IN GERMANY AND ELSEWHERE THAT THIS COUNTRY WILL NOT DESERT THEM.

SOURCE B

CIA memorandum, dated June 30, 1948, for President Harry S. Truman from Rear Admiral, U.S. Navy, R.H. Hillenkoetter, Director of the CIA.

Information has been received that a conference was held in Karlshorst on 28 June 1948 between Russian officials, headed by Marshal Sokolovsky [the military governor of the Soviet zone of occupation], and German members of the German industrial committee. Sokolovsky opened the conference by asking the German industrialists what influence on the Eastern Zone of Germany would exist because of the blockade from the Western Zone.

A German representative stated that being cut off from the West meant a complete stoppage of production in sugar refineries...; it almost meant a complete closing down of canneries since the entire raw material was received from the West; and a certain discontinuance of the Baltic fishing fleet within a short time because of lack of machinery parts. Sokolovsky evidenced a great consternation [alarm] at this statement, replying that the Russians had been led to believe the East could be independent of the West. The German member then stated that the heavy industries...could not produce without the West.... The Russians appeared greatly shocked, and a Russian General, in charge of trade and supply, said, "We had no idea of this situation; Russia is suffering from heavy droughts and is counting on German food supplies this year.... If we had known this, we would not have gone so far."

SOURCE C

Top Secret report, dated July 28, 1948, titled "U.S. Military Courses of Action with Respect to the Situation in Berlin". [This report was prepared by the Secretary of Defense, James V. Forrestal, for the National Security Council.]

As a fundamental basis for consideration of the Berlin problem, it is assumed that it is United States policy to maintain our position in Berlin. This makes it essential to examine the courses of action that this policy necessitates and those to which it may lead.

Careful study of results to date, together with calculations of Berlin supply requirements and maximum air transport capabilities, indicates that minimum requirements can be met by air transport....

The daily cost of air transport supply operations is already very great and will naturally increase with augmentation of tonnage. In addition, it should be borne in mind that even augmented air lift can include little provision for clothing, maintenance material, raw material, or industrial supplies, which means that conditions in the western sectors of Berlin including unemployment, morale, and stamina of the population will steadily worsen even though food, medical, military, coal, gasoline, and Diesel supplies remain adequate for maintaining an existence level for the population.

Finally, it is always possible that the Soviets may devise and employ means, by interference in the air corridor, of vitiating [eliminating] or stopping air transport operations....

Nevertheless, as initially stated, minimum Berlin supply requirements can be met by air transport for at least a considerable, though probably not an indefinite, period. For this reason, the Joint Chiefs of Staff are firmly of the opinion that air transport supply should be continued and should be augmented immediately as necessary to meet the minimum requirements since this is providing and should continue to provide a cushion of time during which some other solution to the Berlin problem may be found....

If the decision is made that our occupation troops are to remain there until forced to withdraw by war action and that an attempt will be made to supply Berlin by force if supply can be maintained no other way, then the Joint Chiefs of Staff recommend that:

(1) All possible time, not only for continuation of effort toward peaceful solution of the problem, but also for preparation for the event of war, be gained by augmentation of the air supply method, and (2) Full-out preparations for the early eventuality of war be inaugurated [begun] immediately....

SET 2: WITHDRAW!

SOURCE D

CIA memorandum, dated June 30, 1948, for President Harry S. Truman from Rear Admiral, U.S. Navy, R.H. Hillenkoetter, Director of the CIA.

On 23 June 1948, the justice administration of the Soviet Zone issued a directive [authoritative instruction] on the judicial [legal] measures to be taken in connection with currency reform.... [T]he directive treats Berlin as a part of the Soviet Zone. A copy of the directive is in the possession of the Central Intelligence Agency.

The above directive was discussed on 26 June 1948 among the justice and police officials of the Soviet Zone. When the Chief of Police of the legal section stated that the directive cannot be enforced because of the geographical location of the courts in Western Berlin, former President Wagner of the Interior Administration stated that this was of no consequence since detailed instructions for enforcement will not be ready for three weeks, by which time the Western Allies will have evacuated Berlin....

The above information is an indication that the Soviets mean business in the present crisis. Having gone this far, it is difficult to see how they could back down without a maximum loss of face even in their own camp [that is, among their own allies]....

SOURCE E

Translation of a letter, dated July 14, 1948, by Alexander S. Payushkin [the Soviet Ambassador to the United States] to U.S. Secretary of State.

The Soviet Government has familiarized itself with the note of the Government of the United States of America of July 6, 1948 in which the situation, which has been created at the present time in Berlin, is described as a result of measures taken by the Soviet side. The Soviet Government cannot agree with this statement...and considers that the situation which has been created in Berlin has arisen as a result of violation by the Governments of the United States of America, Great Britain, and France...in the introduction of...special currency for the western sectors of Berlin and in the policy of the dismemberment [separation] of Germany. The Soviet Government has more than once warned the Governments of the United States of America, Great Britain, and France in regard to the responsibility...The decisions adopted at the Yalta and Potsdam Conferences...have as their aim the demilitarization and democratization of Germany, the removal of the base itself of German militarism and the prevention of the revival of Germany as an aggressive power...In accordance with these agreements the Governments of the four powers took upon themselves for the administration of Germany and bound themselves jointly to draw up a statute [law] for Germany...

After the London meeting of the three powers...measures were undertaken by the Governments of the U.S.A., Great Britain, and France directed towards the division and dismemberment of Germany including preparations which are now in progress for the designation of a separate Government for the western zones of Germany and the separate currency reform for the western zones of occupation introduced on June 18th of this year.

The Government of the United States declares that the temporary measures put into effect by the Soviet Command for the restriction of transport communications between Berlin and the western zones have created difficulties in supplying the Berlin population of the western sectors. It is impossible however to deny the fact that these difficulties were occasioned by the actions of the Governments of the U.S.A., Great Britain and France, and primarily by their separate actions in the introduction of new currency in the western zones of Germany and special currency in the western sectors of Berlin.

Berlin lies in the center of the Soviet zone and is a part of that zone. The interests of the Berlin population do not permit a situation in which in Berlin or only in the western sectors of Berlin there shall be introduced special currency, which has no validity in the Soviet zone....The Soviet Command has been forced therefore to adopt certain urgent measures for the protection of the interests of the German population and also of the economy of the Soviet zone....

With reference to the statement of the Government of the United States that it will not be compelled by threats, pressure or other actions to renounce its right to participation in the occupation of Berlin, the Soviet Government does not intend to enter into discussion of this statement since it has no need for a policy of pressure since by violation of the agreed decisions concerning the administration of Berlin the abovementioned Governments themselves are reducing to naught their right to participation in the occupation of Berlin....

SOURCE F

From newspaper editorial, "West Can Pull Out of Berlin Proudly," Los Angeles Times, September 12, 1948.

Russia is holding the trump cards in Berlin and will only give in at a price that may prove too high for the westerners to pay. Besides, any bargain that one may strike with Moscow today...can be at best only temporary.

No one expects Stalin to live up to his agreements a month, a week, or a day after he has given them. In which case one may well ask, why make the concessions to the Russians in the first place?

Even a most superficial study of the recent activities and attitudes of Russia in Berlin will convince any sensible person that Moscow is staging an intensive effort to drive the western Allies to despair and hence to a declaration of war, in which the Americans, the British, and French will be branded the aggressors. This is the sort of trap that Stalin has set for the west and the west should be very careful not to play into Stalin's hands....

The longer the division of Berlin into four sectors continues and the longer the western Allies remain there as targets of constant humiliations by the Soviet power, the greater the danger of an explosion that will plunge Europe and the world into another conflict.

The western Allies can pull out of Berlin proudly and with every evidence of dignity and get back to their own zones on the excellent ground that cooperation with Russia is no longer possible. They can then establish their military, economic and political front along their Russian border and meet the Soviets on better than even terms....
