Soviet View of the Berlin Airlift

Editor's note: the text which follows is extracted from the book, West Berlin by V. Vysotsky, published in Moscow by Progressive Publishers in 1974. The book deals with postwar developments in and effecting West Berlin. In his coverage of events in the late 1947 and up to mid-1948, Vysotsky maintained that the Western Allies were intent on splitting Germany. The Soviet authorities favored a single united Germany and a single currency. On 19 June 1948, the Western Powers enacted the currency reform in their occupation zones. The extract from Vysotsky begins on page 82.

Western Provocations The acts of provocation perpetrated by the Western Powers aggravated the situation still further and forced the Soviet authorities to adopt additional measures on communications between the Western zones of occupation and Berlin. The movement of boats along the waterways between Berlin and the Western zones was suspended on June 23, 1948, and that of trains on the following day.

Vysotsky then discusses the effects of the separate currency reform, claiming it brought interzonal trade to a standstill and indicated that the Western Powers had openly scrapped the agreement on joint control and administration of Germany and Berlin. He continues on Western actions in response to the suspension of movement.

Pointing the Fingers

In order to continue their presence in Berlin, the United States and Britain resorted to a bitter political struggle- " the battle for Berlin" as they called it, and declared that they would strive at any cost to retain the city as "their advance position." At a meeting held from June 25 to 27 in the White House to discuss the situation,the US president, ignoring the opinion of the majority of his advisers,decided to remain in Berlin and send B-29 bombers to Germany.

In response to Soviet countermeasures the Western Powers raised a tremendous ballyhoo about "increasing aggressiveness from the Kremlin,"blockade of Berlin," and so forth. Finally at the end of June 1948 they announced that an air lift (Luftbrucke) had been organized from the Western zones to Berlin to supply its Western sectors with food, fuel, and raw materials. However claims about the "increasing aggressiveness of the Soviet Union" and its intention to "seize the whole of Berlin" were nothing more than fabrications characteristic of the Western propaganda machine.

All the restrictive measures introduced by the Soviet authorities on the demarcation line and on the communications between the Western zones and Berlin were forced upon them and were only of a "temporary nature." They were undertaken in response to the separate currency reform and designed to prevent the flow of depreciated banknotes into the Soviet Zone, including Berlin, and to safeguard the economy of East Germany and the interests of its population.

Just as farfetched were the assertions about the "blockade of West Berlin by the Russians." Even many Western scholars maintain that all the measures taken by the Soviet authorities to strengthen the guard and tighten control on the demarcation lines and the boundary with the Western sectors of Berlin, were directed against the separatist moves of the Western Powers and not against the West Berlin population. (pp. 83-84)

Vysotsky mentions that the Soviet authorities offered to assume full responsibility for providing food and fuel to the entire population of Berlin. He writes:

Self-created Blockade

The Magistrate (of Berlin) and the US, British, and French military authorities, however, rejected all the Soviet proposals as a "propaganda maneuver." In other words, the "blockade" of the Western part of Berlin was artificially created by the Western Powers themselves. They used the ballyhoo about the protective measures on communications introduced by the Soviet Command and the organization of the "air lift" to step up the "cold war," fan war hysteria, and complete the split of Berlin and the country as a whole.

Operation Luftbrucke was a provocation designed to camouflage the divisive activities of the Western Powers and neutralize the resistance of the German people against the West's aggressive plans. (pp. 84-85.)

Vysotsky covers political maneuvering among the great powers through the remainder of 1948 and into early 1949, contending that action by the Allies, led by Washington, completed the split of Berlin and led to a crisis atmosphere. To ease tensions and deprive the USA of a pretext for aggravating the situation, he said the Soviet government took measures to encourage the Western Powers to negotiate directly and to reestablish the unity of Germany. Through indirect signals via UPI journalist Kingsbury Smith and via direct contacts at the United Nations, the USSR and USA began negotiations that ultimately led to a settlement. Vysotsky resumes with a question to which he provides the answer.

Why did the Western Powers decide to negotiate a settlement of the "Berlin Crisis"?

Why the Allies Negotiated The primary reason was that the United States and its allies failed in their attempts to undermine the economy of the Soviet Zone and force the Soviet Union out of Germany. Just as futile were their hopes of splitting up the united front of the socialist states. The Western Powers were also seriously concerned about the steadily worsening situation in their sectors where the lack of raw materials, especially those which could not be brought in by air, was having a detrimental effect on industry. According to the Magistrate, by the end of 1948 an estimated 5,712 industrial enterprises (out of 62,500) had been closed because of the absence of raw materials, while 12,937 were operating on short time. In March 1949 the number of unemployed reached 144,944, not counting those who worked a short week.

Disturbed by the mounting tension in Berlin, world public opinion, like the Germans themselves, insisted that the Western Powers get down to negotiations with the USSR and bring to an end the steadily intensifying conflict. (p. 98.)

Agreement was reached on 4 May and the blockade ended on 12 May 1949. The editors are grateful to Dr. DanieI F Harrington Historian of the Air Force Weapons Laboratory, for access to Vysotsky's book. Doctor Harrington's article, `The Berlin Blockade Revisited," is recommended for further reading. (International History Review, Vol. VI No. 1, February 1984 pp. 88-112.) His cogent analysis challenges the conventional wisdom about events leading to the blockade and top-level decisionmaking on both sides from June 1948 through May 1949.