

explainity explains: The Berlin airlift

Lukas is a true Berliner! And of course, he knows the Hungerharke. However, it was always just “some memorial” to him ... But now he is to interview contemporary witnesses for a project for history class. He remembers his grandfather always told him stories about the airlift when he was a snip. “Perfect!” thinks Lukas and sets off to interview him.

His Grandfather is absolutely delighted by the interest of his grandson and explains to him first of all how the airlift came about: after the Second World War, the 4 victorious powers, USA, Great Britain, France and Russia, divided Germany into 4 zones. Berlin had a special role: the city itself was to be divided up into four sectors, too. These were then to be governed by the city commanders of the relevant occupying force.

The problem: Berlin itself was located deep in the Soviet zone and the Soviet military administration had the feeling that the Western allies wanted to keep the city for themselves – a conflict was inevitable.

And this was exactly what happened: in 1948 the Western allies introduced the Deutsche Mark as the only means of payment in their sectors. Previously they had tried to implement a currency reform for all of Germany, but this failed on several occasions. The consequences: since the old money became worthless in the western sectors in one fell swoop but could still be used in the eastern sector, the Soviet side was scared of being swamped by the “old” banknotes for this would have led to the collapse of the eastern economy. The Soviet military administration therefore decided to have its own “counter currency reform”. And this time the new currency would also be valid in greater Berlin. This was a provocation that the Western allies could not allow to happen: they declared the reform “null and void”.

The response from the Soviet military administration followed promptly: on 24 June 1948 they closed off all paths of access to West Berlin. All passenger and goods traffic was blocked and the power supply was cut off, too. Lukas’ grandfather remembers the shock the whole city was in. For, without supply from outside, sooner or later West Berlin would starve.

So, food and coal for the power stations – in fact everything required for survival had to be brought to West Berlin. “But how?” Lukas wants to know!

Well, thank God, the western city commanders had already pledged 3 air corridors to Berlin in writing in the winter of 1945! And General Lucius D. Clay already had an idea how to use these: he suggested airlift using aircraft to supply the city. On 26 June 1948 the first American “candy bombers” set out for their destination of Tempelhof. 2 days later the British joined the airlift and even flying boats were used.

However, the 750 tons of air freight per day estimated at the start were still a long way off the calculated daily requirement of the West Berliners... So, the allies kept improving the system: to prevent chaos in the air, a sophisticated pattern was developed that transformed air corridors into virtual one-way streets: freight was flown in from the north-west and south-west and the aircraft returned westwards. The approach windows became increasingly smaller until finally, at the peak, an aircraft was landing every 62 seconds. In the end the time on the ground, including maintenance as well as loading and unloading, was just 30 minutes. The Berliners even built an entire airport in just 3 months!

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Unfortunately, despite these logistical feats, time and again there were tragic accidents. 39 British, 31 Americans and at least 6 Germans lost their lives during the airlift. Nevertheless, leaving West Berlin to its fate was never in question for the Western allies. Lukas' grandfather found that particularly remarkable, for the pilots and the Berliners whom they were bringing the supplies to had been arch enemies just a few years earlier.

At the end, even the Soviet military administration realized they had no chance against the will power of the West Berliners and their new friends. And so, the blockade was lifted completely on 12 May 1949 after more than a year.

Wow! Lukas is thrilled by the real-life history lesson given by his grandfather. And he now looks at the Hungerharke through different eyes, too! He knows: without the tireless effort of all those involved in the airlift, his home Berlin would look COMPLETELY different today.

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