

Philanthropy During the Berlin Airlift

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Food is coming from the sky? Where did it come from? I think I see something! It's an American plane!... This was the Berlin Airlift. The Cold War era was ridden with tension between the Soviet Union and the United States, Britain, and France. This tension stemmed from the results of World War Two that left the bombarded Germany to be divided among the allied powers. This division was the catalyst the Soviet Union needed to expand its power. They saw the opportunity and took it before it left their reach. This led to intolerable conditions for the people within the boundaries of West Berlin. The United States would not sit on the sidelines watching innocent people being denied their freedom. We combated the harsh conditions being imposed on the West Berliners through the Berlin Airlift. During the Airlift, many Americans committed the most astonishing altruistic acts that will forever be remembered in history.

World War Two had concluded with four armies left in Germany; the Soviets, Americans, British, and French. As recounted by Ann and John Tusa, a European historian and a journalist for BBC, "for administrative convenience they divided the country into four zones and split the city of Berlin into four sectors."¹ One zone of the country and one sector of the city were given based on the location of the receiving country. The Soviet Union was allocated the Eastern portion of Germany and Berlin because it was East of Germany. The United States, Britain and France were thus given the three zones in Western Germany and Berlin. From the start of the division the Soviet Union was given an advantageous disposition. The city of Berlin was embedded in the Soviet sector. This would become a primary root of the Cold War.

Each country was responsible for maintaining peace and balance throughout their zone. This wasn't the original challenge of the four-power relationship. It proved to be much more

¹ Anna Tusa and John Tusa, *The Berlin Airlift* (New York, NY: Sarpedon, 1998), 1, digital file.

difficult to maintain harmony between the four zones. This tension rose between the Eastern sectors and Western sectors, so it was essentially the U.S., Britain and France against the Soviet Union. General Lucius D. Clay, who was in charge of the American sectors, avidly worked for a harmonious relationship among the different powers. While Clay, as well as the British, were preoccupied with peace, they neglected their sectors of Berlin and it became, “dependent on Russian goodwill.”² The city was now controlled by the Soviets in nearly every aspect.

As Soviet control leaked out to every corner of the city, the Eastern powers became increasingly secluded from Berlin. This began with limiting access to the city and reducing the number of routes so only “two-thirds of the city” could withstand. As control became tighter and tighter, the Eastern powers were progressively blockaded. In a letter to Clay, the Soviets said in order to enter the city, Americans would have to be ordained a special permit and be personally inspected by Soviet soldiers.³ The transport into Berlin became further limited by restricting railways, water transport, and roads, such that the Soviets, “conceded one road for the western forces to transport their men and supplies through the Soviet zone to Berlin.”⁴ This would make it nearly impossible for the Eastern powers to supply the city. “Churchill cabled on 12 May,” Tusa reported, “that an ‘iron curtain is drawn down’ on areas held by the Red Army.” This metaphorical “curtain” would become stronger and stronger as the Soviet Union tightened their hold on Berlin. Yet the U.S. responded, “Our only interests concern world peace.” Especially after the gruesome end of World War Two, we did not want to interject ourselves into another conflicting situation if it was unnecessary. The U.S. was also aware of the damage that would arise from another conflict. The people in the Eastern zone of Germany would be at a higher risk

² Ibid., 34.

³ Ibid., XIII

⁴ Ibid., 46, 47, 48.

as well as the U.S. personnel that would carry out the possible operations. America maintaining peace showcases our nation's awareness of the well-being of others. This is the foundation of the philanthropic behavior that is to come.⁵

The Soviet's blockade did not stop at a mere minimizing of route access. The conditions imposed on the Berliners were also leading to starvation. About two-and-a-half million would starve or be forced to comply to Soviet rule.⁶ The Soviet Union would not feed the people they took control of if they would not follow their ideals. The State Department of Secretary Washington composed numerous telegrams that admitted America's awareness of the scare tactic of starvation that the Soviets were imposing.⁷ If conditions worsened, the U.S. would have to interject into the deteriorating situation. This became evident by the Berliners' strong opposition to the Soviets and their refusal to submit to their arbitration when the city became "a picture of Hell; [with] flaking ruins and starving people shambling about in tattered clothing" and drunk Soviet troops attempting to control them, noted Tusa.⁸ They would rather sacrifice their hunger than their freedom. In an attempt to control Berlin the Soviet Union took control of most communication devices including Radio Berlin. This was a broadcasting station that was maintained by the original workers but they were told what to say and do by the Soviet Officers.⁹ During this time period, radio was a popular form of communication as it was relatively modern. Even Winston Churchill had "fireside chats" with the people of his country over the radio. The Russians could now have a heightened influence over the people by getting a familiar voice to

⁵ Ibid., 34, 33.

⁶ Ibid., XIV.

⁷ Department of State Office of the Secretary Washington, "State Department Summary of Telegrams, June 28, 1948. Naval Aide Files, Truman Papers.," Harry S. Truman Library and Museum, accessed March 16, 2015.

⁸ Tusa and Tusa, *The Berlin Airlift*, 25.

⁹ Ibid., 26.

tell the them to do things that they would normally resist. These conditions would persist until action was taken to help the people. This aid would have to come presumably from The United States. They had many alternatives, one was to surrender to the Soviets, another of which was war but they ended up choosing one specific option— the air.

A letter written by the Secretary to President Truman stated, “essential supplies for the German population can be delivered by air and if necessary must be at whatever cost. We urge you to...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” according to Bingham.¹⁰ If the U.S. abandoned the people of Berlin for circumstances other than war, it would have been seen as the U.S. giving up hope in themselves, the people of Berlin, and their allies. We had a responsibility to protect the people within the bounds of the city and to safeguard their freedom. We resorted to our last option which was air transport to feed the Berlin population. We could not let another human suffer from the Soviet takeover. This was commended by Matthew Woll, who further stated, “ Mr. President, I urge you to strengthen our stand at Berlin and make obvious that we will not be bullied or beguiled into compromises with dictatorship and the authoritarian state.”¹¹ Transport by air would not only combat the hunger of the innocent but it would also contrast the Soviet communist ideals with those associated with a capitalistic United States. If the air transport is able to maintain its strength it would allow the U.S. to keep a firm foothold in Berlin. This foothold would be very symbolic of the United States’ resistance to the expansion of the Soviet Union as well as our capabilities of

¹⁰ Alfred M. Bingham and William D. Hassett, "Telegram, Alfred M. Bingham et al., to Harry S. Truman, June 25, 1948. Official File, Truman Papers.," Harry S. Truman Library and Museum, accessed March 16, 2015.

¹¹ Matthew Woll, "Correspondence between Matthew Woll and Harry S. Truman, June 30, 1948. Official File, Truman Papers.," Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.

strength overseas as noted by the Department of State Office.¹² It is not just the United States alone that opposes the Soviet expansion. Britain and France are also against it because they, “stand firm in defense of their rights to be in Berlin and... accept no agreement in Moscow which would imply any abandonment of those rights.”¹³ All of the allied powers were now willing to fight for those rights.

The aid to West Berlin began three years after the end of World War Two on June 26, 1948. According to Randy Roughton, a member of the U.S. Air Force who now works in the Department of Defense, aid began with C-47 Skytrains and C-54 Skymasters delivering roughly 2.3 million tons of supplies such as milk, flour, and medicine.¹⁴ This was the beginning of one of the largest humanitarian acts in history. A Luftbrücke, or airbridge, was created that not only transported supplies to Berlin, but it also gave the Berliners hope.¹⁵ At this point the United States was trying to do everything in its power to keep the Berliners from conforming to Soviet rule and to accept their domination. They made sure they were preventing it by focusing all their time and resources on the airlift which was concluded in telegrams received by Truman.¹⁶ The airlift was made possible in the first place by the use of three air corridors between west Germany and Berlin. At the time, air travel was only used to carry a small amount of passengers and limited

¹² Department of State Office of the Secretary Washington, "State Department Summary of Telegrams," Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.

¹³ "Report on Negotiations with Soviets, ca. 1948. President's Secretary's Files, Truman Papers.," *Harry S. Truman Library and Museum*, accessed March 16, 2015.

¹⁴ Randy Roughton, "Forever the Candy Bomber a Split-Second Decision to Share Candy Rations with Blockaded Children Established an Air Force Pilot's Lasting Legacy of Hope," *Airman*, May/June 2011, Military and Intelligence Database.

¹⁵ Tusa and Tusa, *The Berlin Airlift*, XIV.

¹⁶ Department of State Office of Secretary Washington, "State Department Summary of Telegrams, June 29, 1948. Naval Aide Files, Truman Papers.," Harry S. Truman Library and Museum.

mail, other forms of transportation were much more common. The Soviets never saw the potential air travel had and this made it a tremendous advantage to the United States.¹⁷

One pilot who will forever be remembered for his actions during the Berlin Airlift is Gail Halvorsen. At the start of World War Two, he was motivated to join the Army Air Corps due to the attack on Pearl Harbor. Halvorsen later got accepted into a “pilot-training program” and was transferred to military transport service.¹⁸ This program gave him an extensive amount of training that he would use for the rest of his career. After World War Two had ended, Halvorsen was one of the main pilots in the Berlin Airlift. He would fly, “round-the-clock missions from Rhein-Main Air Base to Tempelhof, with 126 missions” which was noted by Roughton.¹⁹ The missions he was involved in included dropping flour, coal, milk, potatoes, dried eggs, gasoline, etc. into Western Berlin.²⁰ Those missions made him an extremely experienced pilot. He knew the area that he was flying over like the back of his hand and he could navigate easily. All of these built up skills would help him through an operation that has characterized his whole life since.

One day when Halvorsen was in Berlin, a jeep was available to him and his friend. They decided to drive back to Tempelhof to the airfield on the Western side. Halvorsen noticed at the end of the runway, in an open space near buildings that were bombed behind barbed wire, were a group of thirty or so children. These children were watching the planes land and take off as they flew over their heads in wonder. He went over to the children and, to his surprise, they spoke right to him in English. They were telling him “Don’t give up on us. If we lose our freedom we’ll

¹⁷ Tusa and Tusa, *The Berlin Airlift*, 48, 49.

¹⁸ Gail Halvorsen, "Gail Halvorsen: Berlin's Beloved 'Candy Bomber,'" interview, *Military History*, June/July 2009, accessed March 17, 2015, Military and Intelligence Database.

¹⁹ Roughton, "Forever the Candy Bomber".

²⁰ Halvorsen, "Gail Halvorsen: Berlin's Beloved," interview.

never get it back.”²¹ Halvorsen said in remark, “They know freedom is more important than flour.” It suddenly came to his realization that these kids have been starving for months and did not have any proper candy to eat like normal kids. But what really amazed Halvorsen is that not one of them asked or begged him for anything. So he reached in his pocket and he had two pieces of Wrigley’s Double Mint Gum. He split it into four pieces and gave it to the kids and those who didn’t get any got to smell the wrapper and were just as satisfied. He was so amazed that he wanted to do something more for the kids. He decided that he would get candy for the kids and drop it to them the next day. They were overjoyed with happiness. In order for them to identify his plane he said he would wiggle his wings before dropping the package.²²

Now Halvorsen had to figure out how to drop the candy safely. Him, his copilot, and his engineer figured out that they could tie handkerchiefs and strings together to make a little parachute and attach it to the chocolate and gum. The first “candy bomb” he made was on July 18, 1948 and it was called “Operation Little Vittles.”²³ This was not the first and only though, he made numerous more drops from candy that was donated by companies such as Hershey's. These were humanitarian acts because it was an unnecessary expense to send the chocolate but it helped the people directly and gave them hope. The U.S. Department of Defense noted the many nicknames that were given to Halvorsen as a result of his candy operations: The Candy Bomber, the Chocolate Flier, and Uncle Wiggly Wings.²⁴ There were other much more profound results that occurred due to his drop. Morale among the Berliners was greatly increased. This was vital

²¹ Ibid.

²² Gail Halvorsen, "The Candy Bomber," interview, video file, 5:01, PBS Video, posted by PBS, November 30, 2014, accessed March 18, 2015.

²³ Roughton, "Forever the Candy Bomber."

²⁴ "Dedication of the Defense Humanitarian Relief Corridor (Washington, D.C.)," *U.S. Department of Defense Speeches*, May 19, 2009, accessed March 17, 2015, Military and Intelligence Database.

to the survival of anti-communism in Berlin so that the people had the morale to combat the ideals of the Soviets.

The philanthropy of the Berlin Airlift is the most prominent throughout history. Never before has millions in dollars in efforts been sacrificed for a group of people who are foreign. Americans had recognized that the Berliners were being denied their natural freedoms that every person should possess and they were also being harmed. If action wasn't taken in the conflict by the Americans, there would have been a significant death toll due to the starvation imposed on the Berliners. Gail Halvorsen represented the altruism during this time period because he went out of his way to better the morals of young children and their families. He saw how much they valued freedom and he wanted to be able to give it to them. It is acts like these that give us hope for our next generations that they will act with eleemosynary grace and watch where they step—hopefully in the direction to help one another.

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