

The Soviets attempted a complete land blockade of Berlin. Checks were intensified at every sector crossing point; one bridge over the Elbe was declared "unsafe" by the Soviets and would remain closed until the blockade ended, 12 May 1949.



Letters stamped for posting in West Berlin were additionally marked as coming from Berlin under blockade. The bear rampant is the symbol of the city.

Berlin began. The Soviets' purpose was clear. They wanted to force the Western Allies either to change their policies or get out of Berlin altogether.

In London and Washington there was firm political agreement that the Western powers would hold on to Berlin. "We are going to stay, period," said Truman. Bevin was equally determined, announcing that "the abandonment of Berlin would mean the loss of Western Europe." It was easy to make such statements, but much more difficult to decide what to do next.

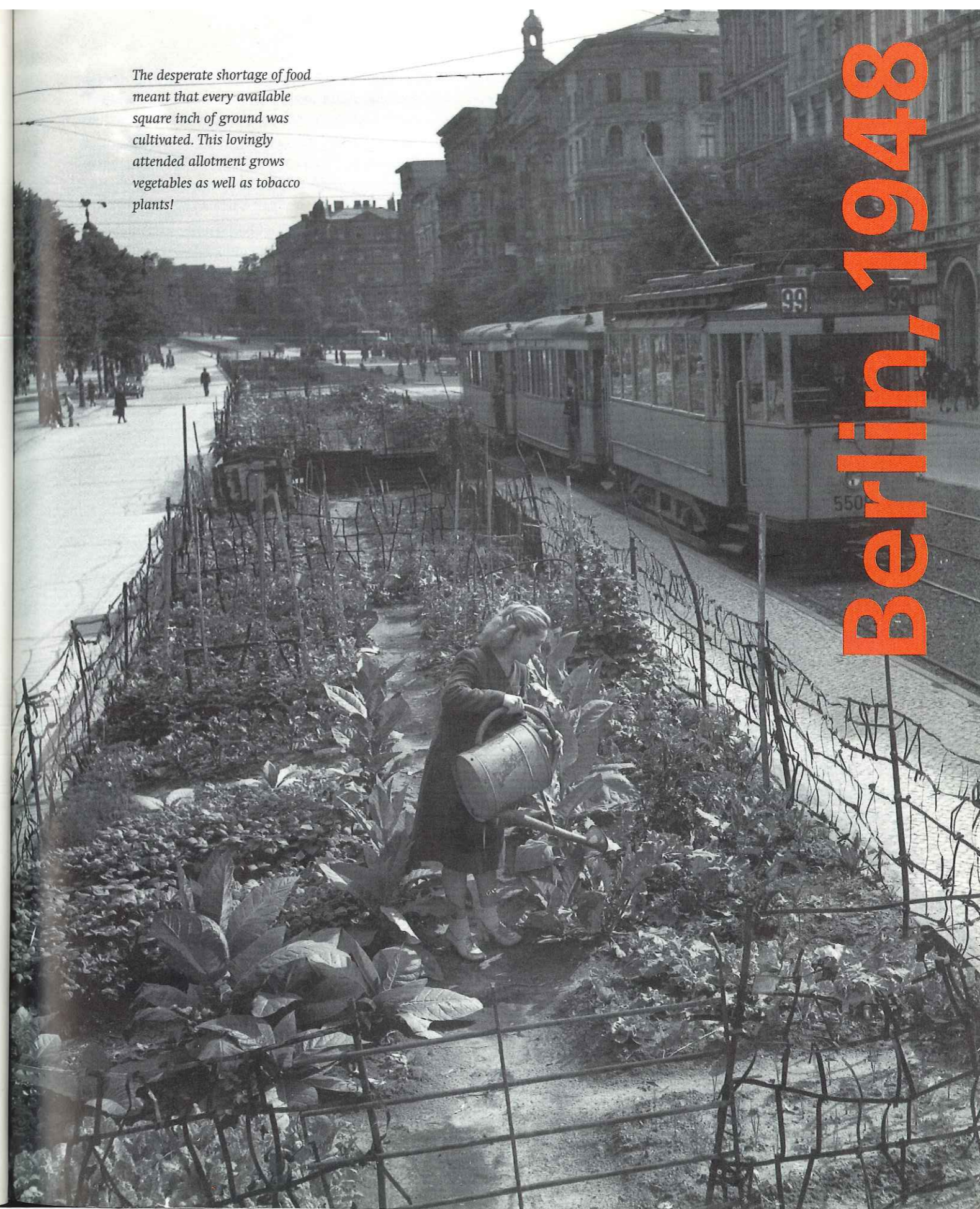
West Berlin had symbolic status as an outpost of the democratic West inside the Communist East. By an agreement made at the time of Potsdam, the Soviets had excused themselves from the responsibility of supplying the British, American, and French sectors of the city. So 2.3 million Berliners, and the Allied military garrison there, were now cut off. The Western part of

the city relied upon the arrival of 12,000 tons of supplies each day. At the time, there was only enough food for thirty-six days, and enough coal for forty-five. The key to keeping a Western presence in Berlin clearly lay in finding a way to supply the citizens with their basic necessities. With rail, road, and canal routes blocked, the only way to get supplies in was by air. But the American C-47 transport, the military workhorse of the day, could only deliver a payload of 3 tons. Initially the prospect for an airlift to Berlin appeared to be bleak.

On 24 June the West introduced a counter-blockade, stopping all rail traffic into East Germany from the British and US zones. Over the following months this counter-blockade would have a damaging impact on East Germany, as the drying up of coal and steel shipments seriously hindered industrial development in the Soviet zone.

On that same day General Clay rang General Curtis LeMay of the US Air Force in Wiesbaden and asked him to put on standby his fleet of C-47s and any other aircraft that could be utilized. The RAF had come forward with an optimistic plan to supply Berlin by air, but Clay was sceptical. He favoured sending a convoy of US military engineers down the autobahn to force their way through the Soviet blockade, with instructions to fire back if they were fired upon. But in Washington, Truman's advisers urged caution and restraint. The president was backed into a corner. It was an election year; the American people would never support going to war with the Soviet Union just to defend

The desperate shortage of food meant that every available square inch of ground was cultivated. This lovingly attended allotment grows vegetables as well as tobacco plants!



Berlin, 1948

Berlin, the capital of a country they had been at war with only three years earlier. But Truman had to be seen championing a firm line and not being soft on the Soviets. He made no final decision that day, but Clay was told by telephone that the president did not "want any action taken in Berlin which might lead to possible armed conflict."

During this week, by chance, General Albert Wedemeyer was visiting Europe from America. He had helped direct the airlift to China over the "hump" from India during the war. By his own calculations, he concluded that it was possible to supply all of Berlin's needs by air. Although both the

British business executive Freddie Laker had begun to buy and sell aircraft parts after the war, and by 1948 he owned twelve converted Halifax bombers. He was asked to make them available for supplying Berlin. With little expectation that the blockade would last more than a few weeks, Laker and his team of pilots and engineers happily went to it, almost as a game to begin with. But as the months passed, the operation grew for the pilots into a crusade for freedom. They were determined to keep Berlin alive, despite the hazards of flying old, rickety aircraft, often buzzed by Soviet fighters and frequently at risk flying heavy loads in bad weather.



ABOVE: 19 August 1948. A C-47 Dakota comes in for a landing while a huge C-74 Globemaster from Frankfurt unloads 23 tons of flour for the people of Berlin. With some difficulty, the enormous plane landed on a new runway at Gatow in the British zone.

OPPOSITE: Inside the Globemaster.

British and Americans had experience with major air supply operations, neither had ever attempted anything on this scale. Clay warned Reuter that to begin with there would be severe shortages and hardship; he did not believe initially the Allies could fly in more than 500 tons a day. Reuter assured him that the Allies could count on the West Berliners to grin and bear it. Then, without consulting Washington, Clay authorized the start of the airlift.

The Airlift Begins

On 26 June the first American transport planes flew into Berlin from air bases in West Germany. The Americans code-named the airlift Operation Vittles, and the British called it Operation Plainfare. Initially about eighty C-47s flew two daily round trips into RAF Gatow and Tempelhof, air bases in the British and American sectors of Berlin. Soon the Americans were adding fifty C-54 Skymasters, four-engined transports that each could bring in 9 tons, three times the payload of C-47s. The Allies organized willing gangs of workers to unload the aircraft and turn them around quickly. Over time these workers learned to empty each plane in just seven minutes. The citizens of Berlin were optimistic that the Allies would be able to save their city. If they had had little problem delivering bombs, they told each other, they certainly could deliver potatoes.

The Royal Air Force had nothing like enough service aircraft available for the operation, and spare planes of any type were soon pressed into the airlift.

Bevin set up a crisis-management team in London to supervise this herculean effort, and early expectations were soon exceeded, as roughly 1,000 tons per day were flown into the beleaguered city. The irony was not lost on many of the veteran fliers involved; instead of destroying Berlin, they were now keeping the city alive.

In July, General Clay returned to Washington for talks with Truman. He still favoured a military convoy to break the blockade, for he believed that the Soviets would step back rather than risk confronting the West. But Truman did not want to chance it. If they chose not to let Clay's convoy through, there would be war. Instead Truman guaranteed Clay more C-54s, and they talked of doubling the airlift to 2,000 tons daily.

The American intelligence community, knowing that the Soviets still had 2.5 million men at arms, was convinced that in a conventional military confrontation the Red Army would walk right over the US forces. But they were equally confident that the Kremlin would never sanction direct military conflict with the West, which might provoke the Americans to take advantage of their atom bomb monopoly. And at this crucial time the Soviet Union was further weakened by a crisis in its own back yard. Yugoslavia split away from the Eastern camp, a defection that made the Kremlin even more nervous about its position and anxious about the support of its satellites.

During July 1948 attempts were made through diplomatic channels to bring about a settlement of the Berlin crisis. On 2 August the British,

Lieutenant Gail S. Halvorsen rigs up candy bar and gum packets to the lines of miniature parachutes for dropping to the children of Berlin. Halvorsen was touched at the sight of children in the streets looking up to the skies for the food planes. He was nicknamed the Chocolate Bomber.

American, and French ambassadors had a private meeting with Stalin to test his willingness to find a peaceful solution. Stalin made it clear that from the Soviet point of view the currency question was crucial, as was the London agreement to create a united West Germany. He argued that if there were two German states then Berlin was no longer the capital of Germany, and hence the Western presence in the city was no longer relevant. Stalin said the Soviet Union was not seeking conflict with the West and would lift the blockade as soon as the West withdrew the B-mark from West Berlin and agreed to four-power rule over Germany. There was in fact little the Soviets could do in the face of the West's superiority in the air and its determination to keep up the airlift. What became clear to the Western ambassadors was that the Soviet blockade of Berlin had but one principal purpose: to prevent the creation of a West German state.

Throughout the summer of 1948 the British and American governments constantly reviewed their options. Military thinking concluded that the airlift could hardly continue through the winter, that October was to be the cut-off point. The British chiefs of staff prepared a contingency plan to withdraw their troops to the Rhine in case of an emergency. In Washington the air force commanders, convinced that the airlift was doomed to fail, concluded that there was a high likelihood of war with the Soviets over Berlin.

"We Are Not Pawns"

The Communist Party in Yugoslavia came to power at the end of the Second World War without Soviet help, unlike what happened in the other East European states. Marshal Josip Broz Tito, the charismatic partisan leader, took power on his own initiative, and through sheer force of character held together the fragile union of the Yugoslav provinces,

Montenegro, Serbia, Slovenia, Croatia, Macedonia, and then Bosnia-Herzegovina. Tito did all he could to exhibit his loyalty to the socialist cause, but there was tension in his relationship with Moscow from the start. Tito was secure at home, internationally renowned, and too independent-minded to suit Stalin.

The Kremlin dictator expected nothing less than total obedience from his satellites. But for Tito, Yugoslavia had earned the right to determine its own destiny. In foreign affairs Belgrade insisted on following its own line and did not seek advance approval from Moscow. During the Greek civil war, for instance, Tito provided military assistance to the Communist guerrillas despite Stalin's unwillingness to get involved. But on other matters, as in its rejection of the Marshall Plan, Yugoslavia was a staunch supporter of Moscow's line. Through the early months of 1948, as the split grew worse, Moscow accused Belgrade of misbehaviour and of ideological deviation from the true socialist cause. Every denial by the Yugoslavs further enraged the Kremlin. Tito refused to give way, saying in March, "We are not

pawns on a chessboard."

Then, on 28 June, only four days after launching the blockade against Berlin, Moscow expelled Yugoslavia from Cominform and called on other Communist parties to isolate Tito. An economic blockade was organized against Yugoslavia that caused great hardship, but Belgrade stood firm. Rejected by the East, Tito over the next twelve months turned slowly, and a little reluctantly, towards the West. Following a disastrous harvest in 1949, a trade agreement was signed with the United States by which Yugoslavia opened its borders. Although not technically a member of the Marshall Plan, Yugoslavia went on to receive about \$150 million in aid from the United States. Throughout the Cold War, Yugoslavia would remain the only independent Communist state in Europe.

A B-29 Superfortress landing in Lincolnshire, England, in July 1948. The threat was that these aircraft carried atomic bombs. We now know that they did not.



The full machinery of Soviet propaganda turned against Tito after he broke away from Moscow and accepted US dollars in aid.

The Threat of Nuclear Retaliation

The question arose as to whether the United States would be willing to use atomic weapons in the developing crisis, for there was still no clear policy within the administration. Truman argued with his Pentagon chiefs that because they were "so terribly destructive," atomic weapons could not be treated as conventional weaponry. He urged the leaders "to understand that this isn't a military weapon. It is used to wipe out women and children and unarmed people." In September the National Security Council produced a secret report designated as NSC-30: "United States Policy on Atomic Warfare." This required the military to be "ready to utilize promptly and effectively all appropriate means available, including atomic weapons, in the interests of national security" and to "plan accordingly." However, any decision about the use of nuclear weapons would be made by the president, "when he considers such decisions to be required." Truman endorsed NSC-30. In a briefing with his chief air force commanders, he "prayed he would never have to make such a decision, but . . . if it became necessary, no one need have misgiving but he would do so."

In a dramatic gesture that summer, a fleet of sixty B-29 Superfortress bombers was flown into the United Kingdom. These were the latest American heavy bombers, designed to carry atomic weapons. The deployment of the B-29s established the US Strategic Air Command in the UK, and the arrival in Britain of "the atomic bombers" was widely publicized. The threat of nuclear retaliation was now made explicit. After a brief debate, at the height of the Berlin crisis, the British government had formally invited Washington to station the bombers in Britain. The invitation neatly fudged the issue as to who would have his finger on the nuclear trigger; the US Air Force bombers would respond to orders from the United States, but their bases would be technically under the command of the Royal Air Force. This theoretical ambivalence lasted for more than forty years. But in practice the real decision, if it ever came to that, would always be made as NSC-30 directed, by the president of the United States.

The planes in fact carried no atomic weapons, but this was a closely guarded secret. There were not enough atomic warheads in existence to equip the B-29s in Britain. Their arrival was mainly a signal to Moscow that the West meant business over Berlin, and Washington took advantage of the crisis to get congressional approval for permanent overseas military bases. The British government knew that the B-29s carried no atomic weapons, and through spies in the London Foreign Office, Moscow probably also knew the reality of the situation.

Meanwhile, the Berlin airlift was proving more successful than anyone ever expected. Tens of thousands of Berliners helped build a new airport at Tegel to reduce congestion at the other two airfields. With capacity for more flights, the Americans added another sixty C-54s to their fleet. Clay now spoke of bringing in 4,500 tons each day. On 18 September, 861 British and American flights delivered a record 7,000 tons in a single day. By this date roughly 200,000 tons of supplies had been delivered, about 60 per cent by the USAF and 40 per cent by the RAF. Coal, flour, drums of petrol, potatoes, medical

Berlin, 1948



Three hundred thousand
Berliners assemble in front of
the ruins of the Reichstag to
hear the mayor, Ernst Reuter,
call for international support
for blockaded Berlin.