

Teaching notes

This resource is one of a sequence of eight resources, originally planned for OCR's Unit 2 Option: Democracy and Dictatorships in Germany 1919-1963 (Y221). The sequence focuses on the key topic 'The impact of war and defeat on Germany 1939-49'. Although the content of the resources is drawn from this particular specification, there is no reason why they couldn't be used to support the teaching of other similar courses, perhaps with some adaptation of the suggested activities.

The eight resources in the sequence are:

1. The war economy and Total War (search '25206' to find it on [Teachit History](#))
2. The impact of bombing (search '25207')
3. Racial policies and the Final Solution (search '25208')
4. Morale (search '25209')
5. Opposition and resistance (search '25210')
6. Consequences of the Second World War (search '25211')
7. The Cold War and Potsdam (search '25212')
8. **Bizonia and the Berlin Blockade (this resource)**

Each resource contains a section of reading followed by some suggested tasks. These could be completed in class or as independent homework tasks.

Background

Stalin's shock at the German invasion of Russia in 1941, and the resulting destruction, had made him extremely security conscious. He had always believed an attack on Russia would come from the west and the Second World War had proven this to him. He now believed that the western allies were planning an attack on the USSR and his spies within the British security services confirmed that Churchill and some of his generals had discussed this possibility. He closely watched what the western occupying powers in Germany were doing, believing that the next attack on Russia would come from a resurgent Germany, armed and encouraged by the British and Americans. It was these suspicions, combined with the actions of the allies in 1946 and 1947 that led Stalin to put pressure on the alliance by blockading Berlin.



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By 1947 the Americans had become deeply alarmed by the prospect of Communist takeovers not only in eastern European countries but also in the west. The existence of powerful Communist parties in France and Italy and a civil war between Communist and royalists in Greece led the USA to focus on the threat of Communism in Germany intently. The British, financially bankrupted by the war, wanted to create a viable German state as quickly as possible, thus ending Britain's responsibility to police and to feed the German citizens of her occupation zone. The British and Americans agreed that securing their zones in Germany against the feared Communist advance was a top priority. One of the first influential voices to state this was George Kennan, an American diplomat who had spent the war years in Moscow. In his famous 'long telegram' to President Harry Truman in 1945 he said:

'We have no choice but to lead our section of Germany – the section of which we and the British have accepted responsibility – to a form of independence so prosperous, so secure, that the East cannot threaten it.'

Kennan believed that economic prosperity was the best way to stop Germans being attracted to Soviet Communism. A Communist takeover was unlikely to begin with a military invasion, but by election victories for the Communists in the British and American zones. The merging of the zones and the introduction of a new currency would insulate them against Communism, but in turn would create a confrontation with the USSR.

Stalin's aims

By 1947 Truman was convinced that America and her allies faced an unprecedented global threat from Communism. It was in the context of this anxiety that Berlin became the first front line of the Cold War, but were Truman's assumptions correct?

Historians' opinions are divided over Stalin's actual intentions. The historian of Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany, Robert Gellately argued in his book *Stalin's Curse*, that Stalin had a clearly mapped out plan for conquering West Germany and the rest of Western Europe. However, Giles MacDonogh, a specialist in German history argues that Stalin's USSR was too exhausted by war to consider any invasion of the west, having lost 27 million soldiers and civilians between 1941 and 1945.

Merging the allied zones

Many American and British commentators and politicians, by 1947, argued that the allies had imposed a harsh treaty on the Germans at Potsdam. This had alienated many Germans who might otherwise have been natural allies of the western powers. Now the threat of Communism had been fully revealed, they argued that it made sense to attract the German population over to the American and British side with the promise of economic prosperity. American and British diplomats and politicians believed that in the Soviet zone, the German population had already accepted Communism, which made both powers more determined to create a viable democratic state in the west. Both powers looked upon a divided Germany as desirable, an independent west German state would be more likely to support Britain and America; the allies believed that a united Germany might easily fall under soviet influence. In July 1946 it was agreed by the Americans and British that their zones should be merged, and within three years a self-sufficient West German state should exist. The one western power to object to the creation of a new German state was France, but by 1948 the French zone had also been incorporated into the newly developing West German state.

Rising tensions

In October 1946 the first elections in Berlin were held and the soviet backed Socialist party the SED (a front for the Communist party), gained less than a fifth of the vote. This was a humiliation for Stalin, the Soviet Union had tried and failed to manipulate the outcome of the election and the knowledge that an electoral takeover in Berlin was impossible led to greater hostility from the soviet occupation forces towards the western allies. The soviet authorities began to make access to Berlin for the western allies more and more difficult.

By 1948 the western zones of Germany were beginning to economically recover and a new found confidence in the German currency was one of the main factors in this return to prosperity. In the Russian zone, the soviets had deliberately over printed German bank notes, to finance the occupation of eastern Germany, but it resulted in inflation. This, in Stalin's eyes, was also desirable, as it would destroy what little savings the German bourgeoisie and other 'class enemies' had left. German farmers and traders lost all confidence in paper money and instead bartered food and goods or hoarded what few items of value they had. The creation of a new currency with a fixed value was essential to kick start the economic recovery. The new Deutsche Mark was exchanged for the inflated Reichs Mark at a rate of one DM for every ten RM, but the currency reform did not happen in the soviet zone. The western allies suspected that the Russians would simply over print again and wreck the entire operation. The soviets responded to this by cutting off all rail and road links to Berlin on 25 June 1948.

The Blockade

The economic rejuvenation of the western zones and the success of currency reform presented Stalin with the pretext to act against the west in Berlin. However, his main goal had been to create a united Germany that would fall into a soviet sphere of influence. The huge sacrifices involved in the defeat of Germany meant that the possibility of the western allies controlling any part of Germany, to Stalin, anathema. He believed that the confrontation over Berlin would decide who, ultimately, had been victorious in the Second World War; to lose in Germany would render the wartime sacrifices redundant.

Long before the issue of currency reform had arisen, the soviets had engaged in a policy of trying to 'wear down' the British and Americans, through direct provocation, harassment and non-cooperation (short of actual military conflict). Blockading Berlin, by cutting off the road and rail links, was designed to bring the new economic miracle to an abrupt halt within the city and to introduce the threat of starvation. However, Stalin also hoped that the Soviet Union could provide food to the city, thus demonstrating to Berliners that Communism could provide materially for them. Air links to the city were kept open in order to prevent the possibility of an allied plane being accidentally shot down, and it was this decision that gave the British and Americans an opportunity to act. Stalin had no idea that they might try to relieve the city from the air.

The Airlift

When it transpired that the Soviets had no ability to provide food for the Soviet and western sectors of Berlin, American and British commanders began to request food to be flown in. The first commodity to be cut off was milk, but the Americans shipped 200 tons of powdered and condensed milk into their sector. The allied powers were aware that the blockade was a bid to force them out, and some western commanders in Berlin believed it might be the start of a third world war. Lucius Clay, the American commander in chief in Germany, believed that a climb down by the allies in Berlin would discredit them in the eyes of the German people and the rest of Europe and would be a huge victory for the USSR.

At the height of the operation, on 16 April 1949, an allied aircraft landed in Berlin every minute.

In total, 394,509 tons of foodstuffs, coal and supplies were carried into Berlin.

Berliners received an average of 2,300 calories a day, which was higher than the UK food rationing system provided at the time.

Initially, the allies were concerned with supplying their own garrisons, but the relief effort was quickly extended to the civilians in the allied sectors. The actions of the Americans and the British were a huge propaganda victory in western Germany and the attempt to control Berlin through starvation backfired on the Soviets. Any chance of political influence over western Germany ended with the start of the blockade.

The historian Tony Judt argued in his book *Postwar*, that Stalin was not as enthusiastic about occupying Berlin as has been suggested. Not only was the focus of Cold War tensions moving from Europe to Asia by 1949, following a Communist takeover in China and plans by Kim Il Sung in North Korea to invade the South, but Stalin saw Berlin as a means of testing western resolve. He also thought that he could force an agreement on the western powers to create a united, demilitarised and notionally neutral Germany. In time he planned to influence and dominate this new state.

Tasks:

1. Essay: 'The Berlin airlift represented a failure of soviet policy in Germany'. How valid is this statement?
2. How far is the view in Source 1 supported or contradicted by Source 2?

Source 1

It would not be fair to be over-critical, particularly when such a fine rescue operation for Berlin was mounted by the western Powers. Maybe there were delays ... I would prefer to stress the positive aspects of the Blockade. First, it was a heroic episode in which the Allied pilots and the Berliners played the main roles. Then it brought about a feeling of real co-operation between the Berliners and the Allies. Those were grey, grim days; but our people showed their steadfastness, their courage, their dry humour and their basic decency.

Willy Brandt, Mayor of West Berlin 1957-66, in an interview in 1974

Source 2

West Berlin children cheering an American transport plane, 1948.



Berlin children-Berlin airlift / 1948 / Credit: akg-images / Universal Images Group/ Copyright © akg-images / For Education Use Only. This and millions of other educational images are available through Britannica Image Quest. For a free trial, please visit www.britannica.co.uk/trial