

# The Berlin Blockade and NATO

In 1948 Stalin tried to starve the people of West Berlin into submission. He failed. The Western allies kept West Berlin supplied through a massive airlift.

## What were the consequences of the Berlin Blockade?

### Towards a divided Germany

By early 1948 Stalin had control of much of Eastern Europe. The Americans responded by helping to make Western Europe wealthy and pro-American. As part of this process the division of Germany became more and more permanent. The west of Germany had long been the industrial heartland of continental Europe. The US government decided to include western Germany in its plans for a new non-communist Western Europe.

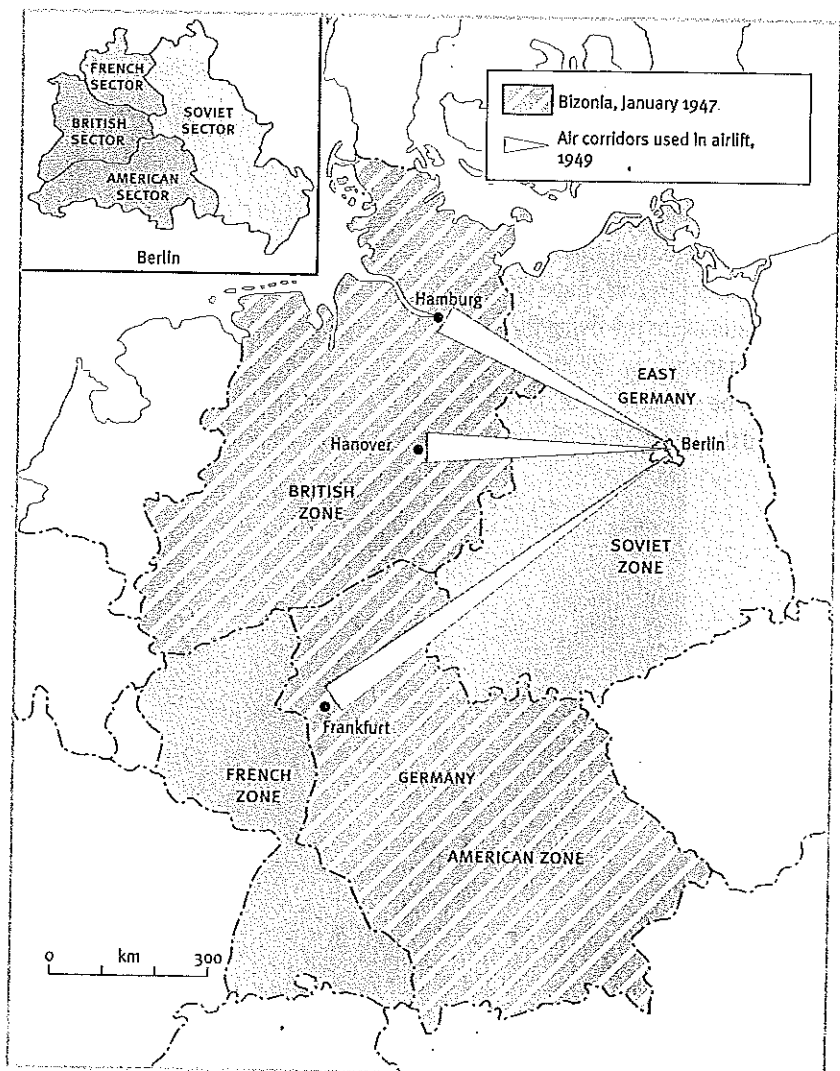
News of a new currency for the west of Germany alarmed Stalin. He saw it as another step towards a divided Germany with the wealthier, larger part of the country closely allied to the USA. Stalin was worried by the idea of a successful, anti-communist government in the west of Germany. In his mind it raised the possibility of another German attack on Russia, as in 1914 and 1941.

In attempting to stop the formation of West Germany, Stalin thought he had one powerful weapon. West Berlin was controlled by the American, French and British forces – but it was a western ‘island’ deep inside the Soviet sector of Germany. Soviet forces controlled all the land routes into West Berlin. Over 2 million people lived in West Berlin and Stalin could cut off their supplies by simply closing the roads and the railways. As a protest against the currency reforms and the moves towards a divided Germany Stalin decided to put a blockade on West Berlin.

### THE EMERGENCE OF WEST GERMANY

- The Marshall Plan for the economic rebuilding of Europe was extended to the western part of Germany but not to the Soviet zone.
- In January 1947 the British and the American governments fused their two zones of Germany into a single administrative unit that was known at the time as Bizonia. In many ways this was the beginning of the establishment of West Germany.
- In June 1948 the Western allies introduced a new currency into their area of control. The new money, known as the Deutschmark, was not used in the Soviet zone.

GERMANY 1945-7



## SOURCE A

*The blockade began on 23 June 1948 when the Soviet authorities made this announcement:*

The transport division of the Soviet Military Administration is compelled to halt all the passenger and freight traffic to and from Berlin at 06.00 hours because of technical difficulties.

## The Berlin Airlift

The Western allies were taken by surprise at the start of the blockade. The Americans were initially not sure how to respond. Some advisers thought that the Western powers would have to give way because the 2 million people in West Berlin would starve as long as the roads out of Berlin remained blocked. Another view was that tanks should be used to blast a way through the blockade. The leading American military expert, General Clay, was keen to send his troops down the autobahn towards Berlin. This could easily have led to a full-scale war with the USSR. The government decided on a middle course: not to provoke war by sending troops towards Berlin but to keep the city supplied by aircraft. Never before had a huge besieged city been kept going by an airlift.

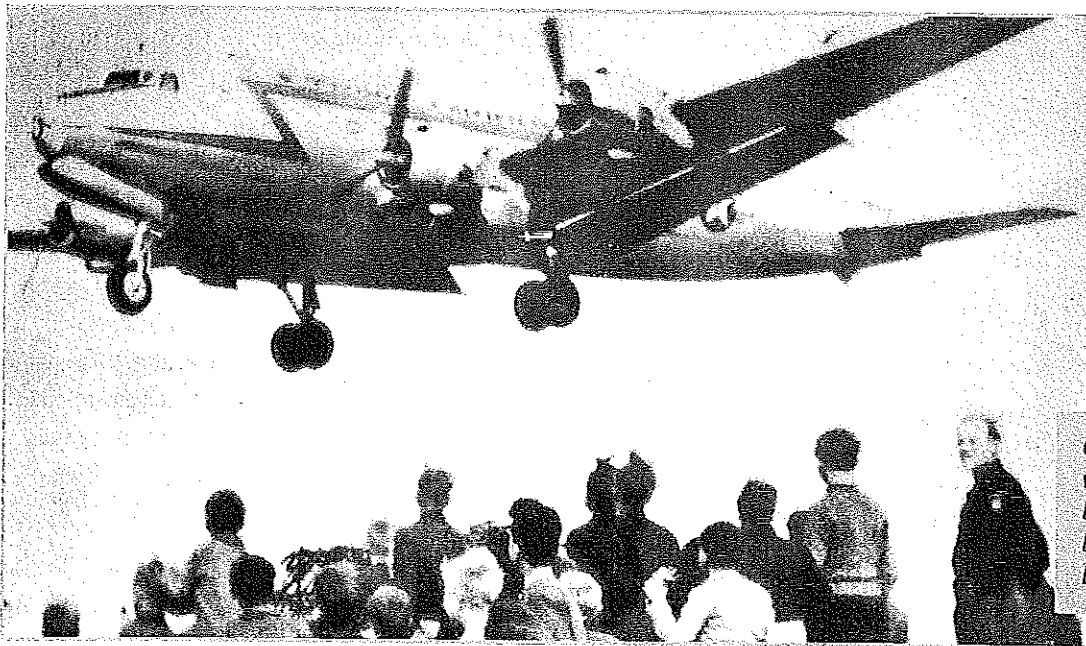
## SOURCE B

*A month after the start of the blockade, Truman ordered General Clay to report to him in Washington to review the Berlin question. In his memoirs, Truman recalled the meeting with Clay on 22 July 1948:*

Clay said that the abandonment of Berlin would have a disastrous effect upon our plans for Western Germany. It would also slow down European recovery. The [West] Germans were concerned about the possibility of our leaving Berlin. We should go to any lengths to find a peaceful solution to the situation, but we had to remain in Berlin. He reported that the airlift was more than enough to meet food requirements, but was inadequate to include the necessary amounts of coal.

I asked General Clay if there were any indications that the Russians would go to war. He said he did not think so. What they seemed to be aiming at was to score a major victory by forcing us out of Berlin, either now or after winter weather forced us to curtail the airlift.

I directed the Air Force to furnish the fullest support possible to the problem of supplying Berlin.



## SOURCE C

*Children from West Berlin watch a US cargo plane bringing in supplies to the besieged city during the Berlin Blockade.*

To people in the West, Stalin seemed to be acting with extreme aggression. The attack on Berlin looked like the first step towards a communist march westwards. The Western allies acted firmly in carrying out the airlift. To President Truman it was a test of the new policy of containment: the USSR could not be allowed to take over West Berlin.

## >> Activity

Explain in your own words why Stalin decided to impose a blockade on West Berlin.

**Stalin ends the siege**

Eventually Stalin had to admit that his attempt to starve out West Berlin had failed. In May 1949 the Soviet authorities called off the blockade. The airlift was a triumph for the American and British air forces. During the airlift British and US planes flew nearly 200,000 missions to Berlin. At the end of the blockade the airport in West Berlin was handling an enormous 1,000 arrivals and departures every day. Over 1.5 million tons of food, fuel and equipment was sent in to Berlin. This achievement clearly proved how determined the USA was to resist Stalin. The Berlin airlift showed how far international politics had changed since 1945. Berlin had then been a symbol of defeated Nazism. By 1948 it was a symbol of Western freedom and the struggle with communism.

**After the blockade: the formation of West Germany**

Stalin's attempt to put a stop to the creation of West Germany was a complete failure. The blockade accelerated moves towards a powerful, pro-Western state in much of Germany. As the airlift began, the military authorities in the western zones also organised meetings to work out a constitution for West Germany. The new state was called the Federal Republic of Germany and it was formally founded in May 1949. The Soviet Union responded to this by setting up a new constitution for East Germany. In October 1949 the eastern state was officially established and it was known as the German Democratic Republic.

West Germany held its first elections in August 1949. A political party called the Christian Democrats won the greatest number of seats and dominated the new state. Its leader was Konrad Adenauer, a conservative who hated communism and believed very strongly in linking West Germany to the USA and Western Europe. The development of West Germany under Adenauer was the last thing that Stalin wanted. The idea of a powerful capitalist German state made him feel insecure.

**After the blockade: the formation of NATO**

The blockade also encouraged the Western allies to form the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO).

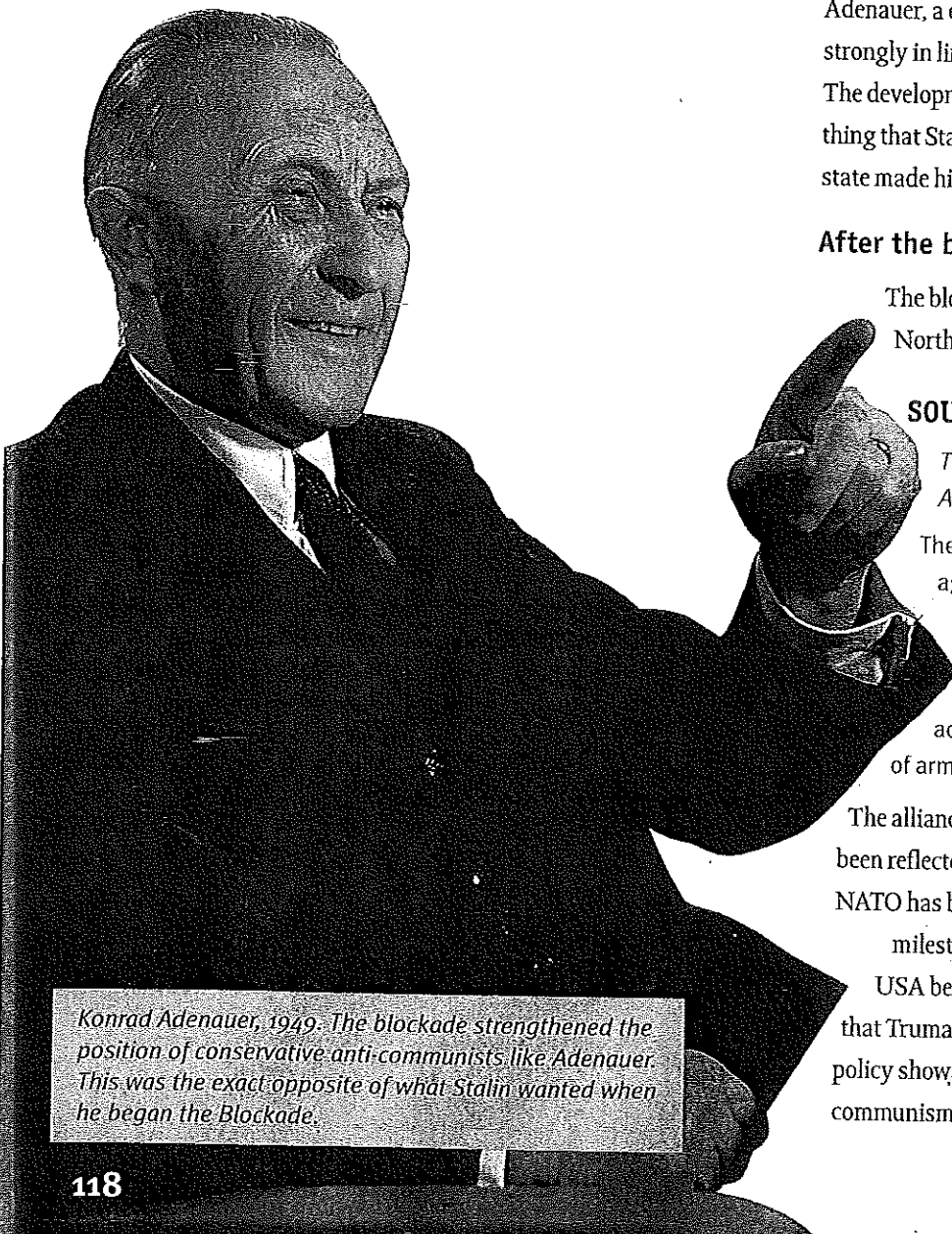
**SOURCE E**

*The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation was set up in April 1949. This is an extract from the treaty.*

The Parties to this treaty agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all. They agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them will assist by taking such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force.

The alliance was dominated by the USA. American influence has been reflected in the fact that every single supreme commander of NATO has been an American. The formation of NATO was a milestone in American foreign policy. Never before had the USA been a member of a peacetime military alliance. The fact that Truman broke with all the traditions of American foreign policy shows how determined he was to stop the spread of communism.

**SOURCE D**



*Konrad Adenauer, 1949. The blockade strengthened the position of conservative anti-communists like Adenauer. This was the exact opposite of what Stalin wanted when he began the Blockade.*

NATO was more than a promise of American help in case of emergency. The alliance was to be supported with large numbers of troops on the ground. In particular, there was a large build-up of NATO forces in West Germany. By 1953, five divisions of US troops were permanently based in Germany.

The Soviet Union felt threatened by this. The sense of threat increased in 1955 when West Germany joined NATO. The Soviet Union responded by setting up its own military alliance in 1955. This was established under a treaty called the Warsaw Pact. For the next three decades NATO and Warsaw Pact forces faced each other and prepared for war.

## Activity

- 1 How did the Berlin Blockade end? Was this a victory for the Soviet Union or for the USA?
- 2 How did the blockade speed up the formation of West Germany?
- 3 How did the blockade lead to the setting up of NATO?
- 4 Do you think that Stalin was pleased with the consequences of the Berlin Blockade?

### NATO AND THE WARSAW PACT

