

Stalin's Bluff

The Berlin Airlift

By: Stephan Wilkinson



C-47s unloading at Tempelhof Airport in Berlin.

Up to 102 of these planes were flying during the first three months of the Berlin Airlift.

Amy Hissom

History of Civilization II

Article Response #6

Saturday, November 28, 2009

After World War II ended in 1945, the four major Allied powers (American, Britain, France, and the Soviet Union) partitioned Nazi Germany into four zones. Germany's capital city Berlin, located deep in the Soviet sector (later East Germany), was also partitioned into four zones. Policy disagreements and conflicts between the Soviets and the other three Western powers kept increasing.

On June 24 1948, the Soviets closed all land and water access to Berlin. They intended to force the Western powers out by shutting off all supplies. The Western democracies had few options. They could withdraw, but that was politically unacceptable, or they could try to resupply the city via land convoy, which could have started World War III. Another option was to try to resupply the city using cargo aircraft, but an operation of such immensity had never been done. Was it even possible?

The decision was made to supply Berlin's food and fuel needs by air. The airlift would be known as "Operation Vittles" by the Americans and "Operation Plane Fare" by the British. The airlift soon reached a point where no more planes could be safely handled, but the daily subsistence level for over two million people

was just barely being met. It took the organizational genius of General William Tunner to turn the airlift from a "cowboy" operation into a virtual airborne conveyor belt.

The airlift continued through the brutal winter months into the spring of 1949. On Easter Day 1949, Tunner mounted an all-out effort to haul in the most tonnage possible. In a 24-hour period, an average of one aircraft per minute, brought in about 13,000 tons of coal, food, and other supplies. This was well above the subsistence level. On May 12 1949, the Soviets capitulated and once again permitted land and water access to the besieged city.

The airlift continued until September 30 1949, to build up a stockpile of supplies, just in case. The total cost of the airlift was about 200 million dollars, and 79 American and British servicemen lost their lives. But West Berliners had kept their lives and their freedom. And most importantly, between former enemies, trust and cooperation had replaced distrust and war.