Nils Torge Mecker History IA: The Berlin Airlift

The Berlin Airlift

To what extent did ordinary West Berlin people contribute to the success of the Berlin Airlift 1948 – 1949?

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# Plan of the Investigation

The purpose of this investigation is to answer the question: To what extent did ordinary West Berlin People contribute to the success of the Berlin Airlift 1948 – 1949?

Having lived in West Berlin during the Airlift, my grandparents told me a lot about it since I was a small child, increasing my interest in the topic. At the time, my grandmother was a young woman, studying at the newly founded Free University of Berlin and my grandfather had his last school year. Obviously, my grandparents view is based on their experience, the experience of normal Berliners.

In most books however, the emphasis is more on the superpowers, USA and USSR, the airlift pilots and the significant individuals, like Ernst Reuter and General Lucius D. Clay. But people tend to forget that the ordinary Berliners also played an important role.

In my essay, I will analyse the contribution of West Berliners, then other factors that made the Airlift a success, before coming to a conclusion. Part of my method includes the translation of answers to a questionnaire I gave my grandparents and several other sources from German into English.

My two main sources to be evaluated for their origin, purpose, values and limitations are: the above mentioned answers to my questionnaire from my grandparents and the book “Daring Young Men – The Heroism and Triumph of the Berlin Airlift June 1948 – May 1949” written by the American historian by Richard Reeves.

# Summary of Evidence

As early as March 1948, the Soviets had withdrawn their representatives from the Control Council1 and they left the Kommandatura on 17 June2. Tensions between the Western Allies continued to rise and trust between the two sides was in decline. On 21 June, the Western Allies introduced a new currency, the Deutsche Mark, in their zones with the exception of Berlin3. The Soviets reacted immediately, introducing their own currency in the Soviet Zone including the whole of Berlin4. As a result, Western Deutschmarks were stamped with a large “B” and distributed in West Berlin5 by the Allies to prevent an economic takeover by the Soviets. This conflict was taken by the Soviet Union as the reason to block all linkages between the Western zones and West Berlin the same day (24 June 1948), on streets, rails and rivers6. Stalin’s aims behind this action were to retain some access in West Germany, especially in the Ruhr7 and to drive the Western Allies out of Berlin.

President Truman’s attitude was very simple: “We stay in Berlin. Period.”8 This meant the population of West Berlin, about 2.1 million9 people, all trapped in Berlin, needed food, coal and electricity, which had to be provided by the Allies. The military governor of the US occupation zone, General Lucius D. Clay, held in high esteem by West Berliners10 favoured

1 NAWROCKI, J. 1987. *Chronik von Berlin*. Chronik – Verlag, page 433

2 MACDONOGH, G. 2007. *After the Reich, From the Liberation of Vienna to the Berlin Airlift*. John Murray, page 527

3 NAWROCKI, Op. Cit. page 433

4 Ibid., Page 433

5 REEVES, R. 2010. *Daring Young Men, the Heroism and Triumph of the Berlin Airlift June 1948 – May 1949*. Simon & Schuster, page 14

6 NAWROCKI, Op. Cit. page 433 / 434

7 SEWELL, M. 2007. *The Cold War*. Cambridge University Press, page 38

8 REEVES, OP. Cit. Page 30

9 Ibid., Page 9

10 Answers from MENZ, G. 2010. Made on 12 August 2010. Bad Neuenahr – Ahrweiler, Appendix 3.

the option of forcing an armed convoy along the Autobahn (Motorway) to Berlin1, but Secretary of the Army Kenneth Royall had told Clay “not to undertake any action ... that might provoke a shooting war”2. It was the British who suggested to use an airlift.3 British

Royal Air Force Commodore Reginald Waite came up with the idea of supplying Berlin by Air. First Clay said it was “Absolutely Impossible”4, but it was the only option, so the Berlin Airlift, with the official name “Operation Vittles”, began on 26 June 19485.

In the next months, 2,325,809 tons of cargo was delivered during 277,569 flights6 by the Americans and British, increasing from 2000 to 8000 tons a day between July 1948 and April 19497. At the height of the operation a plane was landing every 48 seconds8. During the Blockade, Berliners built the Airport Tegel in only three months9 to make more flights possible and they helped to load and unload the planes. Encouraged by the man “full of bravery, energy, toughness and humanitarianism”10, Ernst Reuter, mayor of Berlin, Berliners developed staying power. His famous “people of this world” speech showed this staying power very well, he even achieved 64.5% of the vote11 in the elections for the City Assembly in December 1948. In addition, many West Berliners feared communism, as there was

1 SEWELL, M. 2007. *The Cold War*. Cambridge University Press. Page 39

2 REEVES, R. 2010. *Daring Young Men, the Heroism and Triumph of the Berlin Airlift June 1948 – May 1949*. Simon & Schuster, page 35

3 REEVES, Op. Cit. Page 33

4 Ibid., page 34

5 MACDONOGH, G. 2007. *After the Reich, From the Liberation of Vienna to the Berlin Airlift*. John Murray, page 528

6 REEVES, Op. Cit. Page 274

7 WILLIAMSON, D. 2001. *Europe and the Cold War 1945-91*. Hodder & Stoughton, page 61 / 63

8 BRANDT, W. 1992. *My Life in Politics*. Hamish Hamilton, page 15

9 REEVES, Op. Cit. Page 151

9 VON WEIZSÄCKER, R. 1991. *Von Deutschland nach Europa, die Bewegende Kraft der Geschichte*. Siedler, page 52

11 BRANDT, Op. Cit. Page 15

“suppression, no freedom of expression, exploitation and arbitrariness”1 in the Soviet zone, so most agreed “never to give up their freedom.”2

However, there were also bad days, the whole operation came at the cost of 73 Allied airmen3. In addition, flights were often disrupted by Soviet planes flying close to the Air corridors. But the Soviets never shot down a plane.

Generally, the Airlift went on well, and the Blockade, which had failed, ended on 12 May 19494, the Allies stayed in Berlin. The airlift continued though, until the last flight was made on September 305, which ended the Airlift, a “never seen achievement in human history, a real world record.”6

1 Answers from MENZ, J. 2010. Made on 12 August 2010. Bad Neuenahr-Ahrweiler, Appendix 2.

2 Answers from MENZ, G. 2010. Made on 12 August 2010. Bad Neuenahr-Ahrweiler, Appendix 3.

3 REEVES, R. 2010. *Daring Young Men, the Heroism and Triumph of the Berlin Airlift June 1948 – May 1949*. Simon & Schuster, page XV

4 WILLIAMSON, D. 2001. *Europe and the Cold War 1945-91*. Hodder & Stoughton, page 63

5 REEVES, Op. Cit. page 271

6 Answers from MENZ, J, Op. Cit. Appendix 2.

# Evaluation of Sources

The answers to my questionnaire made by my grandparents is the first source to be evaluated. It was done on 12 August 2010 in Bad Neuenahr – Ahrweiler, Germany and is based upon my grandparent’s memory of the Airlift.

Its purpose is to inform me about the Airlift by answering my questions, in order to help me with this essay.

One value of this source is that the answers come from Berliners, who were eyewitnesses of the event, so they know a lot detail. In addition, they were more or less ordinary Berliners and therefore, their views are very valuable in evaluating the contribution of normal Berliners to the success of the Airlift.

However, the source has some limitations. It was made over 61 years after the Airlift, so my grandparents view on the event is likely to have changed compared to their view shortly after or even during the Blockade. In addition, it only represents the view of two young Berliners, not all 2.1 million who lived in West Berlin at the time.

The second source chosen for evaluation is “Daring Young Men – The Heroism and Triumph of the Berlin Airlift June 1948 – May 1949”, a book written by the American historian Richard Reeves in 2009.

The purpose of this book is to inform normal people of what happened by going through the event chronologically, mainly from the view of Airlift Pilots.

It is a valuable source, as it has been written by a historian who is likely to have researched a lot about the topic. In addition the views of many different individuals who were involved give a more complete picture than the interview with my grandparents.

But, also this source has limitations, with the main limitation being the fact that it mainly portrays the view of Airlift Pilots and not many other types people. On top of this, it only presents the Airlift as a heroic action by the Americans and offers no alternative thoughts. This can already be seen in the title of the book.

# Analysis

The historical context is very important for the analysis of the question and must be in mind when reading this section.

The Airlift marked the start of the Cold War, as for the first time East and West were directly opposing each other. It also lead to the absolute division of Germany and set the political frame for the four next four decades. For West Germans and West Berliners in particular, the airlift turned enemies to friends in the eyes of the Western allies and made them part of the western Block.

The West Berlin population did a lot to help the Americans. They not only built Tegel Airport in three months as mentioned before, they also helped to load and unload the planes. “The Germans ... were really in charge, they knew what they were doing”1, is the view of the book by Richard Reeves. This is also supported by the eyewitnesses, my grandparents, who agree that this was an important contribution by West Berliners, as “It would have been very hard, if not impossible, to keep the Airlift going without the work of Berliners.”2

The earlier mentioned staying power is, according my grandparents, the most important contribution of West Berliners, as without the support from the people, the allied Airlift “wouldn’t have been worthwhile”3 and West Berlin would have been incorporated in the Soviet Sector4. Morale would have been very low, and many people would have taken the offer of going to the east. It would probably have resulted in mass demonstrations. But Berliners chose not to, and despite the bad conditions they stayed strong.

1 REEVES, R. 2010. *Daring Young Men, the Heroism and Triumph of the Berlin Airlift June 1948 – May 1949*. Simon & Schuster, page 51

2 Answers from MENZ, J. 2010. Made on 12 August 2010. Bad Neuenahr – Ahrweiler, Appendix 2

3 Ibid., Appendix 2

4 Answers from MENZ, G. 2010. Made on 12 August 2010. Bad Neuenahr – Ahrweiler, Appendix 2

In addition, General Clay needed apart from his belief in the Airlift, the argument of the will of the people to justify the enormous technical effort to the political leadership in the USA.1

But of course, it was not only West Berliners who are responsible for the success; there are a number of other factors, including the Americans and British who were willing to do it and the pilots who did it. This is emphasised a lot in the book by Reeves, already the title expresses the heroism of daring young men. Without the Allies, Berlin would have definitely been lost to communism.

We also must not underestimate the Soviet contribution. They tried to disturb the planes, but they did not shoot them down, meaning firstly that the operation was able to go forth and second that no war broke out between the USA and the USSR, which would have resulted in a complete failure of the Airlift.

The two most important significant individuals in the Airlift, General Lucius D. Clay and

Ernst Reuter also play an important role in the success. Clay was the main “organiser” of the Airlift, communicating between the American government, the pilots and the Berliners. He was the one who kept everyone informed and so was a main cogwheel in the well working machine called Airlift.

Reuter contributed to the success by showing the staying power to the people, being a good example, “nobody else could have replaced him”2 as effective is the unanimous view of my grandparents. It can be said that he was the main origin of the staying power which brings us back to the first paragraph of this section.

A last reason that made the Airlift a success is, as stupid as it might sound, the weather. The winter of 1948/49 was exceptionally mild3, making it possible for the Airlift to continue on a large scale so that enough supplies were flown in.

1 Answers from MENZ, J. 2010. Made on 12 August 2010. Bad Neuenahr – Ahrweiler, Appendix 2

2 Answers from MENZ, G. 2010. Made on 12 August 2010. Bad Neuenahr – Ahrweiler, Appendix 2

3 WILLIAMSON, DAVID. 2001. *Europe and the Cold War 1945-91*. Hodder & Stoughton, page 63

# Conclusion

All in all, after having discussed the arguments, it has crystallised out that many factors made up a successful Airlift, factors ranging from the Americans and Soviets to General Clay and Reuter and even the weather. The essay also has shown that the West Berlin People played an important role and contributed to the success of the airlift. Now it is time to answer the question. How much did ordinary West Berlin people contribute to the success of the Berlin Airlift 1948 – 1949? Despite the loading and unloading of the planes, they were not involved in the actual out carrying of the airlift. But they morally supported the Americans and themselves. It can be said that they were the moral backbone of the Airlift, the secret fuel that kept it going.

So ordinary West Berliners contributed a lot, by giving moral support, but there were other factors of at least the same importance. Together, all these factors made up one of the rare happy events in the 20th century and marked the policies of the world for the next 40 years: two opposing ideologies trying to win a Cold War.

# List of Sources

## Books:

BRANDT, W. 1992. *My Life in Politics*. Hamish Hamilton

MACDONOGH, G. 2007. *After the Reich, From the Liberation of Vienna to the Berlin Airlift*. John Murray

NAWROCKI, J. 1987. *Chronik von Berlin*. Chronik – Verlag

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SEWELL, M. 2007. *The Cold War*. Cambridge University Press

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WILLIAMSON, D. 2001. *Europe and the Cold War 1945 – 91*. Hodder & Stoughton

## Answers to Questionnaire:

Answers from MENZ, G. 2010. Made on 12 August 2010. Bad Neuenahr – Ahrweiler Answers from MENZ, J. 2010. Made on 12 August 2010. Bad Neuenahr – Ahrweiler

# Appendices

## Appendix 1:

Questionnaire made by me and given to my grandparents to be answered:

1. How did you live during the Blockade?
2. Describe how little there was, using Christmas 1948 as an example.
3. Nevertheless, you stayed in West Berlin. Why?
4. Was the fear of losing your freedom the main reason for your staying power?
5. What other reasons were there?
6. Did the rest of the West Berliners have the same reasons?
7. What did the West Berlin people contribute to the success of the Airlift?
8. What did the Allies contribute to the success?
9. And what the Soviets?
10. On a scale of 0 – 10 (0 = unimportant, 10 = very important), how important were the following things for the success of the Airlift and therefore the maintenance of freedom in West Berlin, according to you?
    1. The staying power of the people of West Berlin
    2. The physical work done by the Berliners (building Tegel Airport, un-, and uploading the planes, etc.)
    3. The willingness of the Americans and the British
    4. The fact that the USSR didn’t shoot the planes down
    5. Ernst Reuter
    6. General Lucius D. Clay
    7. The weather (unusual mild winter)
    8. The organisation of the Airlift
    9. The financing of the Airlift
11. How strong did you question the success of the Airlift?
12. From your point of view, to what extent did ordinary West Berlin people contribute to the success of the Berlin Airlift 1948 – 1949?

## Appendix 2:

Answers from Jürgen Menz (my grandfather) made on 12 August 2010 in Bad Neuenahr- Ahrweiler and translated by me into English:

1. During the blockade, I was 17 years old and had my last school year. Clothes were made from old blankets and similar things. Shoes consisted of wooden soles with oars. We only had to eat what was brought to us by the Airlift and distributed with food ration cards, i.e. dried potatoes, dried vegetables, dried egg, powdered milk, flour, etc. and only in amounts just enough to survive. During the summer months it was also possible to make spinach out of nettles, orache, dandelion, sorrel and similar plants. As a burning material, wood from the numerous ruins was collected.

Public transportations were very limited and only possible during daytime. Electricity, gas and water were only available for two hours a day, very often during the night and only in limited amounts. During winter it was extremely cold. There was no glass in the windows, only plastic foil. In winter, school only took place in unheated rooms and only when it was bright outside, as there was no electricity to light the bulbs. All three minutes a plane was landing, that because of the central position of the airport, had to fly very low over the roofs of the houses.

1. For the whole winter, each household got 12.5 kg briquettes, which were used during Christmas. The cold rooms only got a little warm for a few hours. From the little food available, something was put aside, so that it was possible to eat enough during Christmas in order not to be hungry for a short while. My mother had made

“marzipan” from cooked dried potatoes, sweetener and almond aroma. It tasted extraordinary good at the time. We had no Christmas tree. As presents, we only got small self made things. We had to sit at candle light anyway as there was no electricity. Sometimes we got a little bit paraffin, so during Christmas we were able to sit around a slightly brighter paraffin lamp from time to time.

1. There were only two possibilities. Either to stay in West Berlin or to go to the Soviet occupied zone. (Explanation see 4.)
2. Yes it was. In the soviet zone there was suppression, no freedom of expression, exploitation and arbitrariness. You couldn’t count on the few existing laws. In the western sectors, there was mostly democracy, even though limited by the occupation statute. You could count on the compliance with the laws, also by the occupation powers, which weren’t experienced as such by the people of West Berlin.
3. There were also family reasons and home feelings despite of the destruction, closeness to neighbours, friends and the surroundings in which I had grown up.
4. I think 4. and 5. apply for all West Berliners.
5. The success of the Airlift was based on the will of the West Berlin people to continue to live in relative freedom. Berliners suffered a lot, for the second time; the war was just over for three years. But by not protesting against the bad conditions, they psychologically and ideologically supported the Airlift and therefore the Western Allies. In addition, General Clay needed apart from his belief in the Airlift, the argument of the will of the people to justify the enormous technical effort to the political leadership in the USA.
6. The Allies made the Airlift possible in the first place. They had to provide planes, dehydrated food (so that it was lighter), work out a time plan, etc. In other words, they had to organise it. It was a never seen achievement in human history, a real world record.
7. First of all, the Soviets did not shoot down any planes, even though they tried to disrupt the planes. And also, the negative stories about Soviet behaviour that circulated through the city prevented people from going to the east.
8. 10.
   1. 10

Without the staying power, West Berlin would have become part of the Soviet Zone, it was the biggest contribution by West Berliners.

* 1. 5

It would have been very hard, if not impossible to keep the Airlift going without the work of Berliners.

* 1. 10

The Allies had Berlin in their hands, if they would have given up, the West Berliners themselves would not have been able to stop a Soviet takeover.

* 1. 10

If they would have done it, it would have meant war.

* 1. 8

Without Ernst Reuter another person could have done his job, but I do not believe that the West Berliners would have stood as close together.

* 1. 8

The same applies to General Clay. Of course another general could have done it, but I doubt if there would have been someone with the same positive attitude.

* 1. 5

It was good that the winter was relatively mild, but I think the Airlift would also have been successful if it would have been cold.

* 1. 10

Without the success of the organisation, the Airlift would not have been possible.

* 1. 8

The Airlift was a political and ideological decision; the financing was only a minor part of it.

1. In the beginning, we all had doubts, if it was possible to supply about 2 million people using an airlift. In addition we had fear of war, when the soviets started to make manoeuvres in the air corridors. But after things had stabilised we had no more doubts.
2. The staying power and mainly the staying will were vital for the success. Without the support from the people, the Allied Airlift would not have been worthwhile. The will of the people was represented by Ernst Reuter, who became a symbolic figure for West Berliners and the rest of the world.

The Allies also did a lot, with their biggest contribution being the organisation and their willingness to help.

I would say that without the will of West Berliners the Airlift would have failed, and without the Allies it would have failed as well. These two, together with some of the other points from question 10. made up a successful Airlift.

## Appendix 3:

Answers from Dr. Gisela Menz (my grandmother) made on 12 August 2010 in Bad Neuenahr- Ahrweiler and translated by me into English:

1. I was 19 years old when the blockade began and I worked as a dental assistant until the start of my dentistry degree course at the Free University of Berlin that was founded on 04.12.1948. For me, the Blockade was marked by hunger, coldness and darkness. We only had what was brought to us by the Airlift. In a big city like Berlin, there was no possibility to change valuables to food on farms.

My parents and I lived in an apartment with central heating (which of course didn’t work during the blockade); there was not a single stove. We were lucky to be given a small stove that we connected to our cooker. The kitchen was the only room that was warm from time to time. As we only had two hours electricity, water and gas, we had to sit at candle light or a paraffin lamp, although the paraffin was also rationed.

1. My mother managed to save some food rationing cards, so she was able to surprise my father and me with a “thick soup” out of dried potatoes and dried vegetables on

Christmas Eve. We weren’t hungry for the first time since the start of the Blockade and also satisfied without a Christmas tree and presents.

1. I could only have gone in the Soviet occupation zone. There was suppression, despotism and spying. For us West Berliners it was unthinkable to change democracy to lack of freedom.
2. Yes, absolute.
3. Of course there were also family reasons. Also for my parents it would have been unthinkable to give up the freedom in West Berlin.
4. All West Berliners were in agreement never to give up their freedom.
5. Without protest, we West Berliners endured hunger, coldness and power cuts during the Blockade, as we knew we were fighting for our freedom. This according to me is the most important contribution of the West Berlin People.
6. The allies have made it possible for us, through the organisation of the Airlift, to continue to live in freedom. The allies provided planes, food, coal and other important things to keep Berlin going. As an individual, General Clay was a big figure of the Allies and he was held in great esteem by all West Berliners. He is the man whom we owe a lot.
7. The biggest contribution of the Soviets to the success of the Airlift was the fact that they never shot down a plane and thus prevented a war which would have ended the Airlift. But also the stories about the ruthless actions of soviet soldiers in East Berlin prevented people from going there and further strengthened our staying power.
8. 10.
   1. 10

The most important contribution by us West Berliners, without the staying power we would have become part of the Soviet Zone.

* 1. 5

I think it would have been difficult for the allies to it themselves; it was an important contribution by West Berliners.

* 1. 10

Without the willingness of the allies, there would have been no airlift.

* 1. 10

The shooting down of planes would have meant war.

* 1. 10

He was a symbolic figure. All West Berliners listened to him; nobody else could have replaced him.

* 1. 10

General Clay was also very important, as he was the main coordinator of the Airlift.

* 1. 4

The winter was mild and planes could land easily, but there were also days of bad weather (fog, heavy rain, etc.).

* 1. 10

The Airlift was an unbelievable achievement.

* 1. 7

As the Airlift was made mainly because of ideological reasons, the financing was playing a minor role.

1. At the beginning of the Airlift, we had doubts if it would be possible for the Allies to support all of West Berlin from the air. In addition we feared the Soviet reaction. But after a short time we saw that the Airlift was a success.
2. The staying power of the West Berliners was the key reasons for the success of the Airlift. West Berlin’s mayor Ernst Reuter the key figure, well liked and appreciated, always told the Berliners to hold out.

But of course, the role of the Allies is extremely important too, they were the ones who did it, without them no staying power could have prevented a communist takeover.

All in all, I think it was several factors that made the Airlift successful.