

Key Events – Activity 1

The Berlin Blockade 1947-48

Aims

- Understand the significance of Berlin 1945-1949
- Explore what motivated Stalin to act as he did
- Reach a reasoned conclusion after exploring the evidence

Resources

coldwarKEA1.lgfl.net is your one-stop link to curriculum resources for this activity; you will find videos, photographs and links to the relevant main Cold War sections.

Introduction

Berlin was the final battleground of WW2; along with the rest of Germany, in 1945 it had been split into four sectors: Russian, American, British and French. As the capital of Hitler's Germany, Berlin was deeply symbolic. It was also deep inside the Russian sector of Germany. The Four Powers were supposed to work together to run Germany after the war, but the escalation of the Cold War made an agreement difficult – issues rapidly emerged.

In a way, it was surprising that it was not until 1948 that a major clash occurred! The Berlin Blockade was the first major crisis of the Cold War, creating huge tension between the USSR and the West. On 24 June 1948, the USSR imposed a total blockade on supplies of food and fuel going into the Allied-occupied sector of Berlin.

Why did Stalin impose a blockade? What was he trying to achieve? And how would the West respond? This section explores the events of 1948-49 and their impact on the Cold War.

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Step 1

Imagine you are in a briefing with Stalin, his political adviser, generals, and other key figures. They are making three lists of key points on a flipchart. You have the job of making the lists neat and tidy. Be careful, Stalin likes simple, neat notes and he gets grumpy if he has to read too much. His eyesight is not good but he is too vain to wear his glasses when he should.

Why are we concerned about the Americans?	Why do we want to control all of Berlin?	What we could do to achieve this?

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Step 2

As the Soviets are having their meetings, the Americans and their allies are doing the same. They are even drawing up the same types of lists. Keep them simple and to the point. US President Truman is not as frightening as Stalin, but he can still be grumpy.

Why we are concerned about the Soviets?	Why we want to keep control of West Berlin ?	What might the Soviets do and how should we respond?

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Step 3

In April 1948, Stalin made his move: he cut all of rail, road and canal links into West Berlin. The western half of the city was cut off from supplies of food, fuel, medicine... everything. All of these transport links had to pass through Soviet controlled East Germany, and the Soviets simply blocked them. Stalin was confident that the West would give up and pull out of Berlin. But that did not happen. Instead the Americans and their allies operated a massive airlift of essential supplies. Planes were taking off and landing every 30 seconds for nearly 12 months, and 39 British and 31 American airmen died in crashes throughout the airlift. Eventually, Stalin called off the blockade in May 1949.

You are now back in your meeting on the American side. Once again you are being asked to write the notes up. There are a few big discussions to summarise.

How can we claim the Berlin Blockade as a victory?	Why do we think West Berlin is now safe?	How do the Soviets feel about Berlin, and what might they do there next?