

The Cold War—Beginnings

At the beginning of World War 2, the United States was pursuing a policy of isolationism, Great Britain was allied with France against Germany, and the Soviet Union (Russia) had a non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union. Two years after the war had begun, Hitler decided to violate his agreement with Stalin and try to conquer the Soviet Union with Operation Barbarossa. This made the United Kingdom and Soviet Union allies, not because they got along, or even had similar governments, but because they were fighting the same enemy. Later that year, the United States also joined the alliance after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. Once again, they also allied with the Soviet Union because they were fighting against the same enemies, rather than because they had similar governments and goals. While all three of these countries had the same enemy and short-term goals, they were not similar enough to be considered true allies.

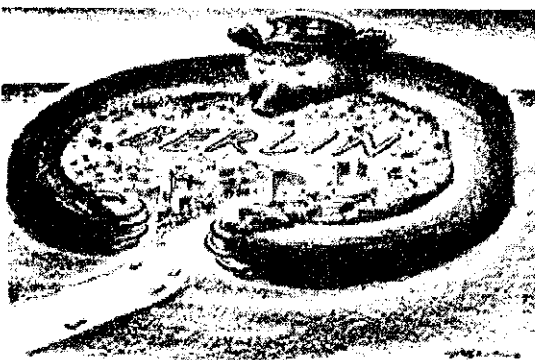
Yalta Conference

One of the most important meetings of WW2 occurred in Yalta in February, 1945. It was clear by this point that Hitler was going to lose and it would only be a matter of time before the alliance between the UK, USA, and USSR was over since the enemy would be gone. This meeting was to decide what to do at that point. During this week-long meeting, Franklin D. Roosevelt (President of the USA), Winston Churchill (Prime Minister of Great Britain) and Joseph Stalin (leader of the Soviet Union) decided that Germany would be divided in half, and that the Soviet Union would be responsible for setting up new governments in the countries that they were currently occupying such as Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Czechoslovakia, and many others. This was not an ideal situation for the Western leaders, since it would give the Soviet Union vastly more power and influence in Europe than it had before the War. Everyone was concerned that the Soviets would use their army if necessary to resist the democratic Western European governments and the United States if they tried to give those countries freedom. Factoring these beliefs into their decisions, Roosevelt and Churchill agreed to allow the Soviets to maintain control of Eastern Europe.



1--Churchill (left), FDR (center), and Stalin (right) at Yalta. Shown seated, since FDR's disability would not allow him to be standing in the photograph.

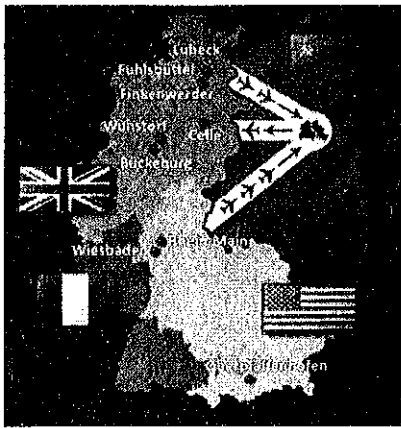
Berlin



The War ended shortly after the Yalta Conference, and it was time for the leaders to honor the arrangement they had made. One of the significant parts of the Yalta Conference was how they had decided to deal with Germany's most important city, Berlin. Berlin is in the eastern part of Germany, and therefore was completely in Soviet hands, but Roosevelt and Churchill were unwilling to allow the Soviet Union to have control of the city, so they divided that too. For a few years, each country was happy to leave everything alone, but soon, the Soviets began to try to expand their power, and one of their first goals was

Berlin. Since they couldn't attack Berlin, and risk a war with the US, Great Britain, and France, the Soviets came up with an even better plan, they refused to allow anything in, or out of Berlin. All of the roads were suddenly "closed for repairs." This blockade effectively shut off the military troops in West Berlin from getting food, clothes, supplies, or even electricity and gas.

The United States was very concerned about leaving Berlin. They felt that giving in to the Soviet Union would just promote the spread of communism, and allow it to take over even more of the world.



As life got very hard in Berlin, the Soviets were hoping that the people living there would vote to leave West Germany and join the Communist, Soviet-controlled East instead. The Allies only had one hope, to deliver enough supplies by air to keep the people happy. For the next year, the Allies (France, England, and the United States) delivered over 2.3 million tons of supplies by air to West Berlin. An aircraft took off every 30 seconds to deliver supplies to the city. While life was not easy, and many things were rationed such as food and fuel, West Berliners refused to join the Soviet Union, and in May 1949, the Soviets lifted the blockade.

The blockade failed from the Soviet perspective but it did do several very important things:

1. The blockade showed that a confrontation between the democratic powers of the world (US, Britain, and France) and the communist Soviet Union could not be avoided.
2. The blockade led to the formation of NATO, an anti-communist treaty of countries
3. NATO led to the policy of containment, an idea that communism's spread must be stopped at all costs. In many country's eyes, the blockade made the Soviet Union look cruel and unreasonable, and made many countries join NATO.
4. After the blockade failed, the Berlin Wall was constructed to permanently divide West and East Berlin.



The Iron Curtain

In a 1946 speech, Winston Churchill proclaimed that *"an iron curtain has descended across the Continent [Europe.]"* He continued to say *"Behind that line lie all the capitals of the ancient states of Central and Eastern Europe. Warsaw, Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade, Bucharest and Sofia, all these famous cities and the populations around them lie in what I must call the Soviet sphere, and all are subject in one form or another, not only to Soviet influence but to a very high and, in some cases, increasing measure of control from Moscow."*

While it was extremely controversial, the British, French, and Americans agreed to allow the Soviets to oversee the elections of new governments to control East Germany, Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, Austria, and the Balkans. The results of these elections served to strengthen Soviet connection and control of these governments, and essentially added them to the Soviet Union. The Iron Curtain became a metaphor, since people in those nations were literally often not allowed to leave for a more free, democratic country in West Europe, nor was information or communication allowed in. In many ways, the line of control that the Soviets held in Europe was a divider stronger than an iron curtain, which isolated and trapped all of its citizens for more than 40 years.

Reading Comprehension Questions

1. Explain why West Berliners called the Berlin Airlift the "Air Bridge."
2. What was the result of the Yalta Conference?
3. Explain why Churchill referred to Soviet control of countries as an "Iron Curtain"

Write About It

Design a propaganda poster or political cartoon about the Berlin Airlift from the West Berlin (Anti-communist) perspective.