

The Use of Balloons In The Cold War: A Method for Distributing Propaganda and a Means of Escape

Bruce MacMillan, NDC

During the Cold War period, there were many attempts by both governments and individual citizens in Western Europe, to disseminate propaganda into East Germany and Eastern Europe through the use of balloons of various types and sizes. State Department telegrams for the period November 1964 thru February 1965, document several such incidences. East German refugees seeking asylum in West Germany, also used hot air or gas balloons as a means of escape.

Radio Free Europe (RFE) and Radio Liberty (RL) conducted the largest Cold War propaganda campaign using balloons. They launched an estimated 590,415 balloons from West Germany, along the border with Czechoslovakia, during the period July 1951 through November 1956. Each balloon was four foot in diameter, buoyed with hydrogen gas, and was loaded with approximately ten pounds of food and 3,000 leaflets with a message of friendship for citizens of Eastern Europe.¹

Several State Department telegrams in December 1964 and January 1965, describe a number of incidents in which West German radar stations track meteorological (and other) balloons, as they drifted from Western Europe, across the border to East Germany. The authorities indicated their concern that these balloons posed a threat to the safety of air traffic, particularly when they entered any of the three Air Traffic Corridors (North, Center, and South) which connected West Germany with West Berlin. Radar stations in West Germany tracked these balloons as reaching altitudes as high as 84,000 feet over East Germany, before they descended. This radar tracking also revealed attempts by East German and Soviet helicopters and fighter aircraft to intercept these drifting balloons. One State Department telegram refers to investigations by West German authorities to establish the source(s) of these balloon launchings from Western Europe. In the State Department telegram, Control #133, December 12, 1964, an official with the West German Foreign Office (FONOFF), advises the State Department that "...agencies usually concerned had current activities which might account for the presence of balloons in the [air traffic] corridors ten days or so ago...". The FONOFF official revealed that "200 to 260 meteorological balloons are being launched daily from West European countries". British officials also told the State Department that these particular balloons were eight feet in diameter.²

Several State Department telegrams also highlight efforts by individual citizens to deploy balloons for the purposes of disseminating propaganda. These telegrams also reveal the concern by West Berlin authorities that such propaganda efforts should be restricted as much as possible to prevent friction with both the East Berlin and East German authorities. The West Berlin Police closely monitored certain individuals known to have engaged in previous such activities. State Department telegram, Control #134, dated December 31, 1964, describes an incident involving several balloons deployed from West Berlin. These balloons are described as

“...children’s toys [which are] equipped with primitive fuses that burned until contact [was] made with [the] skins of [the] balloons causing them to explode...”. This explosion caused the propaganda material attached to the balloon to be distributed in mid-air. The report indicates that West Berlin police subsequently arrested one individual and questioned a second person in connection with the incident.³

East German refugees seeking asylum in West Germany, in at least two instances also used hot air or gas balloons as a means of escape. Perhaps one of the most dramatic events of the Cold War was the successful night-time escape by the Strelzyk and Wetzel families, comprising four adults and four children, from East to West Germany, on September 16, 1979, in a homemade hot air balloon. Walt Disney Productions later produced the motion picture *Night Crossing* (1982) based on this story. Winfried Freudenberg, a resident of East Berlin, made one of the last major escape attempts from East Berlin prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall. He was killed when he fell from his home-made gas balloon, after it had successfully transited from East to West Berlin, on March 8, 1989.

¹ Radio Free Europe (RFE) and Radio Liberty (RL), “Using Balloons to Breach the Iron Curtain”, last modified October 6, 2009.
http://www.rferl.org/content/off_mic_using_balloons_to_breach_iron_curtain/1844564.html

² Telegram from US Embassy Bonn to US Mission Berlin, December 12, 1964, RG 84, Germany; U.S. Mission Berlin (USBER); Classified Central Subject Files 1961-1978, box 37, National Archives and Records Administration.

³ Telegram from US Mission Berlin to Secretary of State, December 31, 1964, RG 84, Germany; U.S. Mission Berlin (USBER); Classified Central Subject Files 1961-1978, box 26, National Archives and Records Administration.