

Convoys! Allied Access to Berlin

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The division of Germany and the concurrent division of Berlin created an outpost of freedom deep within East Germany. West Berlin was an island where life hinged on the air corridors and land transit routes crossing the territory controlled by the Soviets and East Germans. Everyone who traveled to or from Berlin and everything produced or used in Berlin—from coal to soup—arrived or left the city at the forbearance of the Soviet-bloc authorities—who were extremely aware of West Berlin's isolation. The Western Allies refused to yield any iota of the treaty-defined rights that guaranteed their presence in and access to Berlin. The result was an endless series of confrontation on almost a daily basis as each side tested the resolve or tolerance of the other. Although these confrontations usually stayed at a low level of hostility, they could escalate—especially when dictated by Soviet policy. The most infamous example of this type of escalation was the blockade of 1948-49.

Access by air was the easiest, since it was guaranteed by treaties hammered out during and after the war. For safety's sake, West Berlin had a functioning air-traffic control system that was accepted by both sides. On the other hand, there was the occasional or opportunistic harassment by Soviet or East German fighters --often with hair-raising results. All in all, the air access system generally functioned without conspicuous interruption.

Access by the established land transit routes was drastically different. All heavy goods, military equipment and personnel moved over land -- train, Autobahn or if civilian, by canal. Allied military traffic crossed to West Berlin in special military trains, or by convoys along the Autobahn. Vehicles and personnel entered the transit corridors at the inner-German border via heavily-guarded checkpoints. Land traffic could not exit these corridors until their arrival in Berlin. The procedures for clearing a military convoy or train through the corridors put junior and field-grade military officers in direct contact with their Soviet-bloc counterparts. (Figure 1) There was little room for compromise on the frequent disputes over the seemingly ludicrous interpretation of procedure. Mostly these confrontations were handled at the checkpoints, or in Berlin, but, occasionally, they escalated to higher command levels and sometimes even drew the attention of the national leadership.

One of the last issues President Kennedy faced before his fatal trip to Dallas was the Soviet harassment of the Military Autobahn convoys going to and from West Berlin. There were three major incidents, two concerning US convoys and the other a British one. The first confrontation was on October 9-10, 1963, when two US Military Convoys were stopped at the Marienborn checkpoint just inside East Germany. One convoy was coming into West Berlin from its base in the Federal Republic of Germany [FRG] and the other was returning to the FRG. For both convoys, the Soviet observers demanded that all troops "dismount" so that they could be counted and nominally confirm that the convoy had not "picked up" any individuals trying to

escape from East Germany. (Figure 2) The Allies considered dismounting a courtesy and, if all travel documents were in order, there should be no inspection of the convoys. President Kennedy closely followed the incidents and on the 21 October meeting and laid out the tactics and responses to be taken by US convoys. All in all, the stopping of convoys was a continuing plan of small harassments that reminded the Allies about the Berlin issue and the greater issue concerning the two Germanys. It also was a way to pressure the Allies into abandoning West Berlin, and would leave the East Germans in full control of the city and allow the Soviets to score a major propaganda coup in the Cold War.