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Daniel F. Harrington. *Berlin on the Brink: The Blockade, the Airlift, and the Early Cold War*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2012. 414 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-3613-4.

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Commissioned by Seth Offenbach

“Do you think the Russians want to starve 2,000,000 Germans?” General Lucius Clay, the military governor of the U.S. zone in Germany, asked on the first day of the Berlin blockade in June 1948 (p. 75). Although the Soviet Union had just closed rail lines, suspended road and barge traffic, prohibited the sale of food and supplies from the Soviet zone, and stopped supplying electricity to west Berlin, Clay did not think that Moscow would do anything so self-defeating. Yet for the rest of 1948 and into 1949, American and British air forces took responsibility for supplying food and heat to Berliners held hostage by the Soviet Union. That one American pilot, known to the world as “The Candy Bomber,” supplemented his deliveries by parachuting parcels of sweets to eager children waiting under his flight path seems only to epitomize a crisis caused by Soviet miscalculation and cruelty and resolved by Western benevolence, resolve, and farsightedness.

So goes the legend of the Berlin airlift. But in *Berlin on the Brink: The Blockade, the Airlift, and the Early Cold War*, Daniel F. Harrington shows that only gradually, almost by default, the Western powers stumbled onto the policy that avoided war, preserved the West’s position in Berlin, and dealt the Soviet Union a serious blow to its prestige. President Harry Truman, celebrated for his “The Buck Stops Here” desk sign, did his utmost to postpone any decision or showdown on Berlin. Harrington argues convincingly that it was not a clear vision or grand strategy that saved the day but a curious mixture of doubt, bureaucratic rivalry, improvisation, good luck, good weather, trial and error, and hard work. U.S. policy over Berlin, while it produced success, was an ugly and confused mess.

Harrington’s study rests on a tremendous base of archival research in American, British, and Canadian records. His research in U.S. depositories is especially outstanding. He has left no relevant government documents or personal papers unexamined. Specialists will

find, in the text and also the notes, Harrington’s careful correctives of past accounts of the crisis backed up by his thorough research.

Harrington, conscious of historian C. V. Wedgwood’s warning that “history is lived forwards but it is written in retrospect,” avoids writing a retrospective on the airlift (p. 293). Harrington interprets the documentary records looking “forwards” from the perspective of his subjects. He crafts his narrative and analysis with an eye to how historical context constrained and shaped how officials thought about Berlin, the blockade, and the airlift. In this way, Harrington’s book is reminiscent of J. Samuel Walker’s *Prompt and Utter Destruction: Truman and the Use of Atomic Bombs against Japan* (1997), for the Berlin blockade, like the dropping of the atomic bombs, is an event obscured by legend.

Harrington takes apart the myth of the airlift with a close examination of American and British policy toward Berlin, starting as early as 1943. He whisks the reader from bureau to bureau, down the halls of official Washington, following memoranda that are sometimes passed on, sometimes modified or forgotten, and often scribbled on in the margins. This is done in an expert and highly readable manner, and convinces the reader that American officials had wildly varying opinions of Berlin’s importance in the constellation of American interests, if they had an opinion at all. Almost all officials lacked a clear understanding of the legal and political status of Berlin. Harrington explains how, at one point in the crisis, army officers scrambled to write a brief detailing the key events and agreements between the allies governing the city. Revealingly, the army account was almost entirely wrong and confused basic issues, such as which president had earlier cabled Joseph Stalin about Berlin. (It was Harry Truman, not Franklin Roosevelt, though Truman did not remember doing so.) No theory of government or decision making could substitute for Harrington’s research into the bureaucratic wrangling and pecu-

liar personalities in Washington. As deputy command historian at United States Strategic Command, perhaps Harrington has special antennae for the process of government. His examples are good ones for all historians of foreign relations: a policy memorandum always has a backstory, and one can never trust that officials read any document to mean the same thing.

While the technical agreements that governed access to the different zones of occupation, transportation routes, and utilities in and around Berlin were vague, arcane, and misunderstood, they worked well for two years, from 1945 to 1947. But after the 1948 Czech coup, Clay wrote from Berlin to warn that the Soviets might make war in Europe. This transformed American thinking about the Cold War and gave impetus to transatlantic talks about a defensive pact. It also led the American, British, and French to adopt a cluster of policies—the “London Program”—that would allow west Germany to receive Marshall Aid and form a federal government. In response, the Soviets formed the paramilitary east German *Volkspolizei*, undertook military maneuvers on zonal borders, and began to impede Western travel to Berlin. Relationships between the Western powers and the Soviet Union frayed further over how and what currency should be used in Germany.

It is easier, in retrospect, to line this succession of events up as the tit for tat of the emerging Cold War. Harrington explains why this was not so apparent at the time. On the one hand, American officials believed that the increasing Soviet harassment of allied train and other traffic into Berlin was an effort to consolidate control in Berlin. They believed that the crisis had local origins. The Soviets, on the other hand, sought to use Berlin as a pressure point to discourage Western policies elsewhere, especially plans for west Germany. This confusion led to a double failure of deterrence: the West failed to deter the Soviets from interfering with their access to Berlin, while the Soviets failed to deter the West from going ahead with the London Program.

Students of the Cold War know Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev’s earthy maxim: “Berlin is the testicle of the West. When I want the West to scream, I squeeze on Berlin.”[1] Stalin thought that he could inflict the same pain in 1948. In retrospect, given the importance of the Berlin crises and Berlin Wall to the history of the Cold War, it might seem that Berlin had always been such a sensitive part for the West. But Harrington argues that, in 1948, U.S. officials were not convinced that Berlin was at all important. The city was not yet a symbol of Western resolve—it would take the blockade and airlift to make

it one. For a number of good reasons, there were simply no plans to defend the city or to supply Berliners with food exclusively from west Germany or anywhere else except the surrounding east German countryside. Again and again, American officials explicitly concluded that the Soviet Union would not risk alienating the Germans by starving Berliners. For the Pentagon, Berlin was simply not worth a war. Military planners, in their policy papers, considered abandoning Berlin a viable—even preferable—option to confrontation. While some officials believed it essential to hold Berlin for reasons of prestige, it was ultimately Truman’s preference to delay the need for any major decision between fighting for, or fleeing, the city. Truman’s decisiveness, as Harrington explains, has been exaggerated. His was “a policy of postponement” (p. 87).

Postponement was necessary, largely, due to a lack of options open to the West. Diplomatic protests were rebuffed by the Soviets, the United Nations did not give the Americans what they wanted, and Moscow reneged on a tentative agreement to end the blockade. The United States and Britain began flying supplies into Berlin in April 1948 in an effort to increase their garrison’s stocks, and began in earnest after the full blockade began in June. These were not efforts to supply the Western garrisons come hell or high water, nor were they intended as an effort to sustain the entire city. The air deliveries were begun only to buy time and boost morale; they were a “short-term tactic, not a long-term solution” (p. 118).

Harrington challenges the claim made by many—including Truman—that there was any decisive National Security Council meeting where an explicit airlift strategy was formulated and agreed on. Instead, meetings on Berlin resulted in little more than maintaining the status quo of a gradually increasing airlift, which Truman chose because it avoided a decision on stark alternatives. Furthermore, officials did not expect that the airlift could sustain Berlin’s civilian population. They worried about the vulnerability of the airlift to Soviet interference. Worse, it ran real risks for the U.S. strategic posture, for the cargo planes flying to Berlin filled with coal and flour and dehydrated potatoes were the very same planes needed to ferry atomic weapons in case of war with the Soviet Union. Throughout the crisis, the air force and the Joint Chiefs of Staff warned that the airlift “would deny any atomic capability should the crisis ... erupt into war” (p. 111). Here, Harrington points out, was a major disconnect between U.S. foreign policy goals and American military capacity that remained unresolved throughout the crisis.

Overall, Truman's policy was one marked by "indecision and drift" (p. 244). It is to Harrington's credit that he does not interpret Truman's actions as a deliberate policy of wisdom and patience—there is no such evidence. Instead, he casts Truman as Mr. Micawber whose policy was, at best, waiting for something better to turn up. This does not rest uneasily with Harrington's other observation: "The policy worked" (p. 5).

But Truman's ambiguous policy might have been for nothing if not for two other important facets of the crisis: the implementation of the airlift itself and the attitude of Berliners. Harrington explains that the airlift began with ad hoc appointments to a small task force, with air force officers expecting to serve for only a brief duration. In fact, two separate airlifts—one American, one British—operated without any coordination for months. Incredibly, the small overworked pilots and planners found innovative ways to deliver their goods and overcome unexpected difficulties. No one, for example, had realized ahead of time that coal dust from one delivery mixed with flour from the next created a combustible compound that also corroded the airplane's innards. The airlift only gradually achieved coordination and efficiency, thanks partially to one general who applied motion study engineers and Frederick W. Taylor's theory of scientific management to increase the speed and quantity of goods delivered. As the blockade dragged on, the British and Americans formed a joint command, allowing them to increase efficiency and specialization. Improvements to landing strips, lights, and radar all improved the capacity of the airlift, and are explained with Harrington's careful attention to technical detail. These improvements in the field, combined with a steady but grudging release by Washington of more and more cargo plans for airlift duty, exceeded all expectations of what could be accomplished by air delivery. By the spring of 1949, army officials began speaking of the airlift as an "open-ended operation" and planning for an airlift that would last for two more years (p. 258). That Truman and his advisors could postpone major decisions and default to the airlift was only possible because the airlift itself took on a life of its own and exceeded the most optimistic expectations.

The bulk of Harrington's study centers on policy and the airlift, but he credits the resilience of Berliners as another essential element in the West's success. Again, like those who doubted the airlift, there were pessimists in Washington who doubted the city's population could withstand the blockade, especially through winter. But Berliners refused Soviet offers to trade allegiance for aid. They worked in the airfields to unload and prepare planes to return for another delivery. That former Luftwaffe pilots and ground crew helped service the British and

American planes landing in Berlin is a curious twist of history. Overall, Harrington argues, Berliners preferred dehydrated potatoes to Soviet rule. Their allegiance to the West, which grew as the airlift continued, was the political cost the Soviet Union paid for the Red Army's rapes in 1945.

This rings true, and Harrington provides statistics and aggregate information about life in Berlin to support his claims. Harrington tells the story of one Berlin city councilor, Jeanette Wolf, who survived a concentration camp only to be beaten on the street outside the legislature by a mob encouraged by the Red Army and eastern sector police. This story paints a grim picture of life in Berlin, and more stories of individual Berliners might have strengthened Harrington's data-rich account of life under the blockade.

On May 4, the Soviets lifted the blockade. The end came, Harrington argues, because time had come to favor the West, rather than the Soviets. Initially, the Soviets had controlled the clock in Berlin: they could, at any time, stop the airlift. By the spring, after the Berliners had proved their resilience and the West had escalated the airlift to an enormous, open-ended operation, the blockade offered nothing to Stalin. It had failed to deter the London Program and only hastened agreement toward a North Atlantic treaty with its American commitment to Europe's defense. Further, it had serious economic costs to the economy of the Soviet zone that relied heavily on trade with western Germany. And on the political and propaganda front, it was impossible for Moscow to exploit any German resentments of Western policy when the West was feeding Berlin. The crisis was defused through delicate negotiations at a Council of Foreign Ministers meeting with the occupying powers essentially accepting Germany's partition.

Berlin on the Brink is a tremendously detailed and thoughtful account of the Berlin blockade. It engages with earlier scholarship on the crisis and offers new research and a strong argument. At its heart, however, lies an uncomfortable proposition. The policy process, Harrington writes, was "illogical and incoherent," but it worked. If Truman had listened to his "all-too-logical advisers," who wanted Truman to begin planning for various contingencies, either a showdown or to depart Berlin, the result would either have been a general war or a blow to Western prestige (p. 302). This is not the stuff of legend, but it is the stuff of history.

Note

[1]. John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 140.

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