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Britain, the Berlin blockade and the cold war

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The role played by Britain in the conduct of East–West relations during the formative period of the cold war, from 1945 to 1950, is only now beginning to receive the detailed scholarly attention which the subject merits by virtue of its importance and which the release of the official papers makes possible. In the vast and still rapidly growing literature on the origins of the cold war, attention is focussed on the principal protagonists, the United States and the Soviet Union, virtually to the exclusion of all other actors. To the extent that Britain does feature in accounts of the cold war, it is usually treated not so much as an actor in its own right but as an appendage to the United States. Thus it is generally recognized that the withdrawal by Britain of aid to Greece and Turkey in the early weeks of 1947 forced America to assume the lead in the containment of the Soviet Union, but the continuing British impact on Western policy is all too frequently underrated. The tendency to minimize the part played by Britain in the containment of the Soviet Union becomes much more pronounced in respect of the period following America's assumption of the leadership of the free world with the enunciation of the Truman Doctrine and the launching of the Marshall Plan.

It is my view, elaborated elsewhere,[1] that Britain under the leadership of Ernest Bevin played a much more significant and decisive role in organizing the Western world for the postwar struggle for power in Europe than is commonly believed. The aim of the present article is to highlight the nature of that role by focussing on a single cold war crisis, the crisis precipitated by the Soviet blockade of the Western sectors of Berlin in 1948–9. In retrospect it is clear beyond any shadow of doubt that this was the most critical crisis of the cold war. The stakes could hardly have been greater. As Bevin perceived at the time, the future of Germany, the future of Western Europe and the future of the precarious postwar international order all hung in the balance.

The Berlin crisis was not only critical, it was also an unusually long crisis, lasting eleven months, and a highly complex one, requiring actions at the political, diplomatic, legal, military logistical and propaganda levels. As one of the four occupying powers of Germany, with its own sector in Berlin, Britain actively participated, alongside America and France, at all these different levels. That America was the leading actor in management of the crisis on the Western side is not in question.[2] All that is argued here is that for good or bad Britain played a significant role, far more significant than is usually recognized, in forging the overall Western policy of firmness in dealing with the Soviet challenge and that this role can now be usefully re-examined with the help of the documentary record made available by both the British and the American governments.[3] Four aspects of the Berlin crisis

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1. See the author's chapter on Bevin in Avi Shlaim, Peter Jones and Keith Sainsbury, *British foreign secretaries since 1945* (London: David and Charles, 1977).

2. For a detailed account of American perceptions and policy, see Avi Shlaim, *The United States and the Berlin blockade, 1948–1949: a study in crisis decision-making* (Berkeley, London: University of California Press, 1983), reviewed on p. 127 of this issue.

3. For an excellent review of the documents published in the *Foreign Relations of the United States* series, see Geoffrey Warner, 'The division of Germany, 1946–1948', *International Affairs*, Jan. 1975, Vol. 51, No. 1.

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are particularly relevant to an understanding of Britain's role and an assessment of Britain's influence: the circumstances surrounding the imposition of the blockade by the USSR; the basic Western decision to stay in Berlin; the mounting of the airlift to supply the Western sectors of the city; the resort to nuclear deterrence and the consideration of other military measures for resolving the conflict.

Britain and the German problem

The Berlin blockade was the climax of the struggle for power over Germany and in a broader sense over Europe in which the wartime allies became engaged in the aftermath of the Second World War. The German problem continued to dominate inter-allied relations in peace as it had done during the war. But instead of treating Germany as a single economic unit to be governed by four-power collaboration through the Allied Control Council as envisaged in the Potsdam agreements, the occupying powers began to impose in their respective zones their own social, economic and political systems. Each was driven by hard necessity to pursue policies which, as a result of their incompatibility, produced a frustrating impasse.

Britain found itself in the most acute predicament. The British zone was capable of producing only 40 per cent of its food requirements. Given the parlous state of the British economy, not to mention popular feelings towards the German nation, Britain strongly resented having to expend its scarce dollar resources, at a time of food rationing at home, on feeding its populous zone in Germany. The British government therefore insisted that ways be found to make Germany pay its own way. Germany's recovery was all the more urgent because it was considered indispensable to the recovery of Western Europe as a whole. Therefore, in the second half of 1946, the British government negotiated the fusion of its zone with the American zone of occupation in Germany, also a deficit area, to form 'Bizonia'.

On the diplomatic plane, the respective positions of the three Western powers and of the Soviet Union on Germany's future grew further and further apart. The meeting of the Council of Foreign Ministers in Moscow in March 1947 revealed no possibility of a settlement based on four-power agreement. Bevin and Marshall concluded that something must be done, even if it meant a final break with Russia, to arrest the drift towards economic chaos which could only pave the way to the spread of communism in Germany and the rest of Europe. Marshall made his famous offer while Bevin organized the West European response and German recovery got under way within the framework of the European Recovery Programme. Political considerations thus converged with economic necessity to bring about a shift in Anglo–American policy away from the Potsdam agreement which envisaged the creation of centralized agencies for Germany as a whole. The thrust of the new policy was to endeavour to rescue the Western zones of Germany by walling them off against Eastern penetration and integrating them into the international pattern of Western Europe rather than into a united Germany.

The London meeting of the Council of Foreign Ministers, in November–December 1947, proved decisive precisely because it decided nothing. The basic question before the conference, as in Moscow in the previous spring, was whether or not the allies could agree among themselves to reunite Germany. And the unequivocal answer was that they could not. Following the anticipated failure of the conference, British and American delegates met to coordinate their next move in what was by now a definite policy of moving towards the creation of a separate West German state. Bevin and

Marshall instructed their Military Governors in Germany to work out plans for a political structure in Bizonia and they also agreed to invite the French to participate by fusing their zone in a trilateral merger.

Trilateral discussions took place in London, with the participation of the Benelux countries, between February and June 1948. The outcome was the London Programme, directed at bringing about the economic revival and the political reconstruction of the Western zones of Germany. Russia's next move, accurately predicted by British and American officials, was to try to delay the implementation of the London Programme by applying pressure to the vulnerable Western enclave in Berlin. The Western allies' failure to secure in writing rights of access to their Berlin sectors in the wartime agreements for the joint occupation of Germany placed them in a very weak position, legally and materially. Soviet pressure, however, did not have the desired effect and may indeed have had the reverse effect of clinching the determination of at least some British and American officials to proceed swiftly with the formation of a West German government. General Lucius Clay, the American Military Governor, and General Sir Brian Robertson, the British Military Governor in Germany, impressed upon their French opposite number, General Pierre Koenig, the importance of proceeding energetically in defiance of Soviet threats and Soviet protests. On 31 March 1948, Robertson said 'if we keep on talking indefinitely, we might wake up some fine morning to find the Hammer and Sickle already on the Rhine'.[4]

The Soviet Union stepped up the pressure to induce the Western powers to abandon their plans by imposing, on 1 April, a partial blockade restricting Western access to Berlin. It was only after this 'mini-blockade' proved inadequate for the task that the Soviet authorities, on 24 June, severed all the rail, road and water routes between the Western zones of Germany and the Western sectors in Berlin. The vulnerability of this Western enclave as a strategic outpost buried a hundred miles deep inside the Soviet zone raised doubts in the minds of some American officials about the feasibility of staying in Berlin and the wisdom of trying to do so. There was also widespread fear in Europe that the blockade of Berlin might be only a prelude to a Soviet military thrust across the Elbe and that it might touch off a third world war. Bevin, however, was confident that the Soviet Union did not plan to resort to overt military aggression to attain its objectives in Europe. What he did fear were the far-reaching political consequences of a Soviet success in forcing the Western powers out of Berlin. From the very outset, therefore, he set his face firmly against any retreat under Soviet pressure and any compromise which smacked of appeasement. The lessons of Munich a decade earlier conditioned his whole approach to the Berlin crisis. From beginning to end he consistently resisted the basic solution proposed by the Russians for lifting the blockade of Berlin in exchange for a Western suspension of the London Programme.

The decision to defend Berlin

The war of nerves waged by the Soviet Union in Berlin had already produced a number of proposals for action prior to the advent of the full blockade. Winston Churchill, leader of the opposition at the time, made privately the most startling proposal for action in April 1948 to the British and American governments. He had

4. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1948, Vol. II: Germany and Austria* (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1973), p. 159. (Henceforth this series will be referred to as *FRUS*.)

already alluded to the temporary nature of the Western monopoly over atomic weapons in a foreign affairs debate in the House of Commons on 23 January. He revealed that he was greatly preoccupied with the shortness of the period during which the atomic bomb would remain 'in safe hands'. His proposal in April was to threaten to launch a nuclear war in order to force the Soviet Union to withdraw from Berlin and eastern Germany. Churchill's views were reported by Lewis Douglas, the American Ambassador to London, as follows: 'When and if the Soviets develop the atomic bomb, war will become a certainty . . . He believes that now is the time, promptly, to tell the Soviets that if they do not retire from Berlin and abandon Eastern Germany, withdrawing to the Polish frontier, we will raze their cities. It is further his view that we cannot appease, conciliate or provoke the Soviets; that the only vocabulary they understand is force; and that if, therefore, we took this position, they would yield.' Douglas himself, however, thought the proposal was full of 'practical infirmities';[5] Bevin and Prime Minister Attlee appear to have ignored it.

The other alternative to Western compromise or withdrawal from Berlin came from General Clay. He favoured an armoured breakthrough on the highway from the Western zones of Germany into Berlin after an earlier attempt to send unarmed trains across the Soviet zone had ended in ignominious failure.[6] With General Robertson he broached the idea of forming an Anglo–American lorry convoy and forcing it through the Russian checkpoint. Robertson reported to his government that he did not see much future in this idea because a few tanks across the road at a defile would soon bring the convoy to a halt, quite apart from the fact that the Russians might get the better of a shooting match.[7] It was precisely for these reasons that the convoy idea met with unalterable British opposition every time it was reopened for discussion by General Clay or the US Joint Chiefs of Staff.

By the time the real crisis broke out, with the closure of all the land routes to Berlin, British thinking had crystallized round three points which were to serve as guidelines for British policy until the dispute was resolved. The first point was to maintain the Western position in Berlin; the second was to avoid war; the third was to proceed with the implementation of the London Programme. Point number one effectively ruled out the option of withdrawal and liquidation of the vulnerable enclave inside the Soviet-occupied zone in Germany—an option which found a growing number of adherents in Washington, especially among the military. Point number two precluded the resort to coercive measures, such as that of an armed convoy, to compel the Soviet Union to rescind the blockade. Point number three left Britain virtually no latitude for negotiation because the concessions it could offer were of little interest to the Russians, while the kind of concessions that the Russians were after would have meant halting both the unification of the three Western zones and the establishment of a West German government.

The option of negotiation was implicitly rejected at the outset of the crisis. Russia's terms were spelled out in the Warsaw declaration, issued on 24 June, proposing the restoration of four-power control over Germany, the formation of an all-German government, the conclusion of a peace treaty with Germany and the withdrawal from Germany of the forces of all the occupying powers. The French were inclined to agree to four-power talks but the British and the Americans saw the Warsaw declaration as a ploy to sabotage Western unity and gain political control over all of Germany, and

5. *FRUS 1948, Vol. II*, pp. 895–6.
6. Lucius D. Clay, *Decision in Germany* (London: Heinemann, 1950), p. 359.
7. Robertson to Foreign Office, 2 April 1948, *FO* 371/70490/C2529/3/18 (Public Records Office, London).

therefore agreed to ignore the communist overture.[8] The deadlock on the diplomatic front was thus complete: the Soviet Union would not lift the blockade unless the entire German question was reopened, and the British and Americans would not reopen the German question to four-power talks so long as the blockade of Berlin remained in force.

The Western allies were not agreed, however, on a positive course of action, and the Americans were unable to provide the lead because they themselves were in a considerable quandary on what position to adopt. In the first few days of the crisis, Washington seemed almost paralysed by uncertainty and fear. 'No one was sure, as yet,' recalled George Kennan, 'how the Russian move could be countered or whether it could successfully be countered at all. The situation was dark and full of danger.'[9] During these few crucial days, London moved with greater speed and decisiveness in making its basic strategic choice to stay in Berlin, in announcing this decision and in prompting the American government to follow suit. Led by its staunchly anti-communist Foreign Secretary, the British Cabinet quickly resolved to do everything to supply Berlin by air and to concert a common policy in this matter with the governments of the United States and France. Much of the inspiration and initiative for the airlift came in fact from the British side. Of all the options under consideration, the airlift uniquely suited the three-point British policy of staying in Berlin, avoiding war and pressing ahead with the London Programme. From the very first day of the blockade, therefore, British hopes and British planning revolved round this possibility.

The airlift

On 25 June 1948, Major-General N. C. D. Brownjohn, the British Deputy Military Governor in Germany, reported to the Cabinet that the British garrison in Berlin could be supplied by air but that food stocks for the civilian population would last only twenty-seven days. In reply to questions he said that it would not be practicable to bring freight trains from the Western zones to Berlin by force. Nor would it be desirable to convoy lorries by road to Berlin, save as a major military operation. Ministers expressed concern at the position that would arise if land communications were not restored before the food stocks of the civilian population were exhausted. They ordered that immediate consideration be given to the possibilities of maintaining supplies to the civilian population in the Western sectors of the city, and in particular to the extent to which supplies could be maintained by air.[10]

Upon receiving these instructions, General Robertson went to consult with General Clay. He had opposed the armed convoy proposal previously as both impractical and too risky, and he saw no reason to change his mind now. Britain, in any case, was not prepared to participate in an action of this kind. As an alternative, Robertson suggested to Clay the possibility of supplying Berlin by air.[11] He himself had already made arrangements for the Royal Air Force to start flying supplies to the British garrison. At first Clay had doubts about the political and technical feasibility of the proposed course of action but he quickly rallied round and on the following

8. Report to Bevin, 'Policy on Germany', 8 July 1948, *FO* 371/70502/C5611.

9. George F. Kennan, *Memoirs 1925–1950* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967), p. 421.

10. Cabinet Minutes (48), 43rd Conclusions, Minute 3, 25 June 1948 (Public Record Office, London).

11. Cabinet Minutes (48), 44th Conclusions, Minute 4, 28 June 1948; and Jean Edward Smith, ed., *The papers of General Lucius D. Clay: Germany 1945–1949, Vol. II* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1974), pp. 696–704.

morning, 26 June, the first transport aircraft arrived in Berlin with food for its people. RAF pilots and planes spearheaded the airlift and Robertson continued to coordinate the British part of the joint operation with Clay. The British contribution was thus decisive in improvising the airlift strategy which spared the Western leaders the agonizing choice between an appeal to arms and an ignominious retreat.

Bevin's personal authority was also instrumental in dispelling doubts about the strength of the Western commitment to the defence of Berlin. Their policy must be one of firmness, he told Ambassador Douglas, for the abandonment of Berlin would have serious, if not disastrous consequences in Western Germany and throughout Western Europe. Anticipating a long-drawn-out struggle, Bevin suggested that a tripartite committee be formed in London so that decisions might be taken on the basis of complete information. He also suggested staff talks to make a joint appreciation of the logistical and military situation and wondered whether more heavy US bomber planes could be sent to Europe to disabuse the Russians of the view that the allies lacked determination.[12]

Under Secretary of the US Army, General William Draper, and General William Wedemeyer, his chief planning officer, stopped in London on 27 June for consultations en route to Berlin and Douglas took them to see Bevin. American policy had not yet been settled and once again it was the forceful British Foreign Secretary who took the initiative and gave the lead. Bevin told his visitors that every effort must be made to build up in the shortest possible time an Anglo–American force which could lift at least 2,000 tons a day. Draper replied that the Americans hoped to put in about 1,000 tons a day. Bevin said that this was not enough and that he was convinced that the Americans, with their great resources, could do better than this. Quite apart from the practical task of feeding the inhabitants of Berlin, there would be immense psychological value, he said, in showing not only the Germans but other countries of Western Europe and, of course, the Soviet Union and its satellites, what air power could do. The Americans reacted very favourably to this and said they would do their best to meet the Foreign Secretary's recommendations.[13]

Bevin informed the Cabinet on 28 June that in view of the reports published in the Soviet-controlled press in Berlin about preparations for Western withdrawal, the Foreign Office was issuing a statement confirming the government's intention to maintain its position in Berlin and the United States was being urged to make a similar statement. There could be no question of yielding to Soviet pressure, he said. If the Western allies were forced out of Berlin, the project of Western union would be fatally weakened. The needs of the civilian population in the British sector could be supplied by air alone and every effort was being made to expand the air services into the city. From the Minister of Defence the Cabinet heard that there would be nothing to be gained by attempting to force through convoys by rail, road or water, since the Soviet authorities could interpose effective technical obstacles. Attention must therefore be concentrated on expanding the use of freight aircraft. General Robertson had reported that the Soviet authorities might attempt to interfere with air traffic either by fighter aircraft or by barrage balloons. The Cabinet felt that the risk of interference by fighters must be accepted and that any barrage balloons should be shot down at once.[14]

12. Bevin to Sir Oliver Franks (Washington), 25 June 1948, *FO* 371/70497/C5031; and Douglas to Marshall, 26 June 1948, in *FRUS*, 1948, Vol. II, pp. 921–6.

13. Minute by Frank Roberts, 29 June 1948, *FO* 371/70499/C5215.

14. Cabinet Minutes, (48) 44th Conclusions, Minute 4, 28 June 1948.

Having unequivocally made and announced the British commitment to the defence of Berlin, Bevin was relieved to learn that the US government had definitely decided to maintain a firm though unprovocative attitude. A Cabinet committee on Germany, headed by Attlee, had been organized to assist Bevin in keeping the Berlin situation under review and considering means of dealing with it. It was to this committee that Bevin reported, in the afternoon of 28 June, the American decision and the American query on the basing of a group of B-29 heavy bombers in England. The committee approved the proposal to send eighty-two US fighter aircraft through the United Kingdom to their zones in Germany and also three groups of heavy bombers, one of which was to be based in the United Kingdom and the other two in the American zone in Germany.[15]

Staff talks were held in Washington, with President Truman's approval, on 30 June, against a background of growing concern over the military situation in Berlin. Fleet Admiral Leahy, General Bradley, Admiral Denfeld, General Vandenberg and Rear Admiral Glover met with the representatives of the British Chiefs of Staff. Admiral Moore, head of the British delegation, said that his government considered the matter of remaining in Berlin as vitally important and that this battle was one which they could ill afford to lose. Leahy responded to this by saying that the President felt that it was very necessary for the Western powers to remain in Berlin. An exchange of information on the air transport capability revealed that the RAF and the US Air Force between them could deliver 2,000 tons per day at the present level of operations and that the RAF could not fly more than 750 tons. In their opposition to any attempt to fight through to Berlin on the ground, the military chiefs of both countries found themselves in agreement. Leahy pointed out in this regard that the United States, either on its own or combined with Britain, would not have sufficient strength to fight convoys through and that the Joint Chiefs of Staff considered this proposal impracticable. Admiral Moore revealed that orders had been issued to General Robertson to reconnoitre the British zone for additional troop locations to impress the Russians that they meant business and asked if a similar directive could be issued to General Clay. Admiral Leahy and General Bradley ruled out such a move on the ground that the Russians would recognize it as bluff since they knew that the United States had no more troops to send. The British government, reported Admiral Moore, had authorized the shooting down of any balloons that might be put up by the Russians in the air corridors to Berlin and he wanted to elicit the American view on this matter. It turned out that the Joint Chiefs of Staff had no evidence to suggest that the Russians would attempt to block the passage of their planes in the air corridors and the balloon problem appeared to them to be exaggerated. They thought that in the event of a Russian attempt to obstruct passage with balloons, the US government would probably wish to exchange notes with the Soviet government and thereafter the decision might or might not be to shoot them down.[16] All in all, the meeting did not add substantially to the airlift and bomber-deployment moves already in progress, but it did serve a useful purpose in apprising each side of the plans and intentions of the other. It revealed, too, that on practically every military measure under consideration to hold the Western position in Berlin, the attitude of

15. Cabinet Committee of Ministers on Germany, minutes of meeting held on 28 June 1948, copy in *FO* 371/70498/C5136.

16. Memorandum for the record: 'US Chiefs of Staff meeting with representatives of the British Chiefs of Staff, held on Wednesday afternoon, 30 June 1948, by Rear Admiral C. D. Glover, Leahy File, Folder No. 33, Record Group (RG) 218, National Archives, Washington DC; and Kenneth W. Condit, *The history of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Vol. II: 1947–1949* (Historical Division, Joint Secretariat, Joint Chiefs of Staff 1976), pp. 136–7, RG 218.

the US Joint Chiefs of Staff was more cautious and more circumspect than that of their British counterparts.

With the guns remaining silent, the politicians moved to the centre of the stage to wage the war of words and nerves which was steadily gaining momentum. In a sustained political offensive to boost morale on their side and to demoralize their opponents, leading Western politicians publicly affirmed their common resolution not to budge. On 30 June a defiant Bevin announced to a packed and cheering House of Commons the British government's decision to maintain its position in Berlin and to place all its resources at the disposal of the common effort to supply the city. 'We recognize', he said, 'that as a result of these decisions a grave situation might arise. Should such a situation arise, we shall ask the House to face it. His Majesty's Government and the Western allies can see no alternative between that and surrender, and none of us can accept surrender.'[17] His Majesty's Opposition pledged its fullest support. Drawing back was unthinkable, proclaimed Sir Anthony Eden in a robust speech, for the effect of doing that on Britain's authority and that of the Western allies in Europe would be catastrophic. 'If ever there was a time to stand firm,' he declared, 'it is now: if ever there was a cause in which to stand firm it is this.'[18] In Washington, on the very same day, and in response to persistent British prodding, Marshall issued a firm declaration of his government's intention to remain in Berlin.

Atomic diplomacy

Identical protest notes were delivered by the three Western powers to the Soviet government on 6 July, although neither the British nor the Americans held out much hope of a satisfactory Soviet reply. Bevin impressed on the Americans that they should be in no hurry to negotiate, but should instead indicate their position by taking military measures such as stepping up the airlift and deploying the B-29 bombers in England. The character of the Soviet reply did nothing to lessen the importance he attached to sending the bombers across the Atlantic and he reiterated his government's willingness, indeed eagerness, to receive them.[19] Throughout the world the B-29s were known as the 'atomic bombers', and their transfer to bases in Britain would have brought them within striking distance of Moscow. The decision to proceed with the dispatch of the B-29s was taken by the National Security Council on 15 July and constituted one of the most significant decisions of the entire crisis. Among the reasons for this decision was the desire to give the US Air Force experience in this kind of operation and also to accustom the British to accommodating American forces. Once the planes were sent, it was calculated that they would become an accepted fixture, whereas deterioration in the situation in Europe was liable to erode the positive British attitude.[20]

That evening Washington announced that the B-29s would leave the following day for RAF bases in Britain.[21] Although the flight was officially described as a routine training mission, it was accompanied by lower-level publicity disclosure that the bombers were atomic-capable and hints that they carried nuclear warheads. The sixty bombers which came to East Anglia on this highly publicized flight from Florida and

17. *House of Commons Debates*, 30 June 1948, Vol. 452, col. 2221–34.

18. *House of Commons Debates*, Vol. 452, col. 2213–8.

19. Memorandum of Conversation, by Under Secretary of State Lovett, 14 July 1948, in *FRUS, 1948*, Vol. II, pp. 965–6.

20. Walter Millis, ed., *The Forrestal diaries* (New York: Viking, 1951), p. 457.

Kansas belonged to the US Strategic Air Command, which had, in 1946, been given delivery responsibility for nuclear weapons. Their arrival led to the establishment of the first US Strategic Air Command base in Great Britain. A comment in a Soviet publication, repeatedly quoted by Churchill, that 'the British Isles had now become an aircraft carrier' increased public awareness that Britain had put itself at the forefront of Western defence.[22] But the Cabinet remained firm and unwavering. Even its most fiery left-winger, Aneurin Bevan, had favoured the boldest retort, once the Soviet challenge had been delivered. Believing that no risk of war was involved, he had argued powerfully in Cabinet in favour of sending a force by land, covered by tanks, as the swiftest way of ending the crisis.[23] When the airlift was chosen instead, the Cabinet was determined to make it a success and agreed to the stationing of the B-29s on British territory without any formalities, conditions or reservations.

This forward deployment of American air power signalled to the Russians that an attempt to seize West Berlin might provoke bomber raids into the Soviet Union. The hitherto implicit threat of nuclear retaliation as an alternative open to the allies in the event of a Russian attack was now made more conspicuous, if not explicit. Moreover, while the deployment of the bombers first in Germany and then in England was conceived as a temporary crisis measure, the crisis itself provided an opportunity for extending the 'atomic perimeter' around the borders of the USSR. The ramifications of the decision, therefore, extended far beyond the particular crisis which occasioned it.

It was not known at the time whether the B-29s despatched to Britain did actually carry any atomic bombs and this uncertainty spawned a good deal of speculation. Airpower rattling was a familiar cold war phenomenon in the form of B-29 flights over various European cities as part of air shows or courtesy visits and the stationing of B-29s in Germany, some of which had flown into and out of West Berlin before the blockade.[24] These B-29s, however, were not capable of delivering atomic bombs. Those which could were not deployed outside the continental United States. The despatch of the two groups of B-29s to Britain in mid-July 1948 was regarded as a momentous event in the history of the cold war because it was generally assumed, by contemporary observers as well as later historians, that these were of the modified type and hence constituted the forward movement of an American nuclear striking force. The only question which puzzled historians was whether these nuclear-capable bombers actually carried atomic weapons in their bomb bays or not. Recently, however, it was casually disclosed by official British and American historians that no atomic bombs accompanied the B-29s and, what is much more surprising, that the bombers themselves were not of the type which could deliver atomic bombs. B-29s of the modified type did not arrive in Britain until the summer of 1949.[25] There was thus an element of bluff in the improvised Anglo–American resort to nuclear diplomacy at the height of the Berlin crisis. But it was a move that probably exercised the desired deterrent effect, to judge by the fact that the Russians did not adopt stronger measures such as interference in the air corridors.

21. *New York Times*, 16 June 1948.

22. Andrew J. Pierre, *Nuclear politics: the British experience with an independent strategic force, 1939–1970* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 79.

23. Michael Foot, *Aneurin Bevan: a biography, Vol. II: 1945–1960* (London: Davis Poynter, 1973), pp. 229–30. See also D. C. Watt, *Britain looks to Germany: British opinion and policy towards Germany since 1945* (London: Oswald Wolff, 1965), pp. 63–7.

24. George H. Quester, *Nuclear diplomacy: the first twenty-five years* (New York: Dunellen, 1970), pp. 49–50.

25. Margaret Gowing, *Independence and deterrence: Britain and atomic energy, 1945–1952* (London: Macmillan, 1974), Vol. I, p. 311; and Condit, *The history of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, p. 139.

At another crucial meeting of the National Security Council, on 22 July, it was decided to eschew a ground convoy and rely on an expanded airlift and a direct approach to Stalin to deal with the unresolved problem posed by the blockade. Charles Bohlen, who was sent to coordinate the approach to Stalin with the British and the French, noted on the part of these allies a growing fear that hasty American action would precipitate a war. His efforts to persuade them that their fears had no basis in fact were not entirely successful. At one meeting Bevin said to Bohlen, only half-jokingly: 'I know all you Americans want a war, but I am not going to let you have it.'[26] Bevin agreed only reluctantly and grudgingly to a personal appeal to Stalin, after arguing that this method had not proved helpful in the past and that it would build up the Soviet ruler's prestige throughout Europe.[27]

The Soviet leaders behaved during the Moscow talks in very much the same way as they had done over Iran in 1945. Stalin would put on an air of congeniality and appear to accept a reasonable basis for agreement while Molotov would whittle down the apparent concessions in subsequent discussion of detail and put forward new and impossible demands.[28] Change in the Berlin currency, ostensibly the reason for the transport restrictions, was the carrot with which the Western envoys tried to tempt the Soviet leaders to lift restrictions. But the Soviet leaders were unwilling to give away their bird in hand, Berlin, for what they regarded as birds in the bush, namely, the principle of a currency change and the prospect of four-power talks on Germany as a whole. Frank Roberts, Bevin's Private Secretary who served as the British representative at the Moscow talks, was forcibly reminded, by Molotov's repeated arguments that until quadripartite control was re-established in Germany as a whole, it was a waste of time to talk about re-establishing quadripartite control in Berlin, of the important Leninist thesis that it is essential to decide the general question first, before one can discuss aspects of it, however important such particular aspects may be. Roberts's line of argument was that by improving the situation in Berlin, they would be paving the way for fruitful discussions on Germany as a whole. This argument, he was forced to recognize, had no appeal to the Russians and 'they would certainly not be moved by it to give up their Berlin pound of flesh'.[29]

Starting from the same premise, General Robertson reached very different conclusions. As the diplomatic discussions were faltering, he confidentially reiterated his opinion that it was not possible to keep Berlin supplied by air through the winter. His conclusion was that if they could find a half-way house, it would be better to accept it rather than admit the breakdown of diplomacy. He was ready to settle for a *modus vivendi* in Berlin which would keep the allied position there in equilibrium pending four-power discussions on Germany.[30] So pessimistic was Robertson's appraisal that Bevin did not simply disagree with it, but ordered that it should not be circulated within the Foreign Office. Evidently he thought that the Military Governor's report showed signs of defeatism and appeasement and he feared that these would spread to other British officials and to the public. 'Much more than Berlin will be at stake,' Robertson was told, 'and I think the Secretary of State will be prepared to contemplate serious and even extraordinary measures within our power in order to

26. Charles E. Bohlen, *Witness to history, 1929–1969* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1973), p. 174.

27. Record of Meeting held in the Foreign Office, 26 July 1948, *FO* 371/70505/C6250; and Douglas to Marshall, 26 July 1948, in *FRUS, 1948, Vol. II*, pp. 986–8.

28. Roberts to Foreign Office, 8 Aug. 1948, *FO* 371/70506/C6441.

29. Roberts to Strang, personal and confidential, 10 Aug. 1948, *FO* 371/70508/C6725.

30. Robertson to Foreign Office, 10 Aug. 1948, *FO* 371/70506/C6531.

win the day.'[31] Robertson understood that his review of their strength in Berlin was not well received but he felt unable to alter it and pointed out that it had been discussed and agreed by his senior staff. 'I am convinced that in the course of time the Soviets will steal the city from under our noses,' he predicted.[32]

Although he expected the Moscow negotiations to break down, Bevin was determined that the allies should not in any circumstances surrender Berlin. As he told Douglas, he would rather hang on to the bitter end and be driven out if necessary than voluntarily give way. The next two months, before the onset of winter, he said, would be vital and the challenge was to build up the stocks in Berlin substantially by raising the daily delivery to between 7,000 and 8,000 tons. Such a step might save the world, he continued. They should not trouble too much about the cost because the steps which he proposed could not possibly cost a sum equal to a day's war. The Soviet Union's intention had long been, he reminded the American Ambassador, to make the whole of Germany a satellite of the Soviet Union. Because it had failed in that objective, it was the more anxious to turn the Eastern Zone into a Soviet satellite. To frustrate this second objective, it was essential that the Western allies should hold out in Berlin.[33]

The failure of the diplomats to make any progress round the conference table towards a settlement of the Berlin dispute led the Western military planners to concentrate their attention on possible military courses of action. This time it was the American Joint Chiefs of Staff who took the initiative in trying to develop preliminary plans for an allied convoy to supply Berlin. The British Chiefs of Staff, however, replied on 27 August that they were still of the opinion that any attempt to force armed convoys into Berlin would be militarily unsound and politically undesirable. They were also convinced that, whatever conditions might prevail in the future, the fundamental impracticality of the proposal would remain unaltered. They could not, therefore, agree to the initiation of joint plans.[34]

Another subject of inter-allied consultations concerned the nuts and bolts of nuclear deterrence, and here the British were surprisingly forthcoming and supportive. Douglas raised with Bevin 'on a personal basis' the question of the B-29s that were already in East Anglia. He said that the arrangements with the RAF for the first ninety days appeared reasonable. He was, however, very anxious that there should be no difficulties about cost, for example, in accommodating them after the ninety days, since this might lead Congress to raise awkward questions when appropriations were being considered. Bevin promised to keep a very watchful eye on the matter. He did not know what the latest developments were, but undertook to make enquiries.[35]

It is curious, not to say disconcerting, to observe that such complex and sensitive questions, with such far-reaching implications, could be handled 'on a personal basis' between sovereign states, however close and intimate. Some of the questions arising out of the basing of the B-29s are still a matter of burning public interest and vigorous public debate today. In 1948, the Labour government provided the facilities which could be used for the launching of nuclear weapons from British soil, without asking questions, imposing conditions or even requiring that it should be consulted

31. Foreign Office to Robertson, 12 Aug. 1948, *FO* 371/70506/C6531.

32. Robertson to Strang, 11 Aug. 1948, *FO* 371/70508/C6670.

33. Bevin to Sir Oliver Franks (Washington), 11 Aug. 1948, *FO* 371/70507/C6611/3/G.

34. Memorandum by the representatives of the British Chiefs of Staff, 27 Aug. 1948, Plans and Operations 381, RG 319, National Archives, Washington DC.

35. Bevin to Sir Oliver Franks (Washington), 12 Aug. 1948, *FO* 371/70507/C6625/3/G.

in the event of a decision to use them. To avoid a public debate, a member of parliament who questioned the arrival of the B-29s was told that they were here on a temporary mission of 'goodwill and training'. Even within the Cabinet no serious discussion appears to have taken place, with the result that the facilities were not made subject to a formal agreement between the two governments until 1952. It could hardly have been out of naiveté that Bevin failed to go into the details of his extraordinary offer to turn Britain into a staging post for a possible nuclear attack against the Soviet Union at the height of the cold war. The more likely explanation is that he realized the implications all too well and actively solicited a permanent American military presence in the United Kingdom as a concrete token of American commitment to the defence of Western Europe. Such an attitude was entirely consistent, after all, with his broader strategy of erecting a global balance of power in which America would underwrite the recovery and security of Western Europe and provide an effective counterweight to Soviet power—the strategy, in Canning's phrase, of calling in the New World to redress the balance of the Old.

If the Americans chose to exploit the Berlin emergency in order to extend their atomic perimeter, and there is ample evidence to suggest that this was their intention, Bevin saw no reason to complain. At the time, the American stockpile of nuclear weapons, consisting of less than fifty bombs, some of which were later discovered to be unusable, was itself in a state of considerable disarray. Actual delivery of these unwieldy A-bombs would have taken the best part of a month, since both the unassembled bombs and the aircraft capable of delivering them would first have had to be moved from the United States to bases in England, Okinawa or North Africa.[36]

As war began to loom ominously on the horizon, following the failure of the talks held by the four Military Governors in Berlin, Secretary of Defense Forrestal began to press Truman hard to make the decision to use the A-bomb in time of war. The question was brought up at a meeting in the White House on 13 September of raising with the British government the possibility of constructing huts for housing the components of the bomb on two British airfields (Scunthorpe and Lakenheath), which would mean a net gain of ten days in the event of a decision to use the bomb in an emergency. 'The importance of this decision to us', wrote Forrestal in his private diary, 'is that it will indicate whether or not the British mean business because the equipment of these fields obviously carried with it the inference of the purpose for which they will be used.'[37]

Forrestal—who was to commit suicide while undergoing psychiatric treatment only three weeks after leaving office in March 1949—was obsessed with the fear that Western public opinion might not sanction the use of the A-bomb against the Soviet Union in the event of war. He was particularly troubled by the thought that a war-weary Britain might lack the necessary nerve and resolution in a crisis of the supreme magnitude. For his peace of mind he needed constant reassurance that the British public and their government would support the use of the bomb against their estranged wartime ally in the East. To judge by his diary notes, Forrestal received satisfactory reassurances on this score which helped to put his mind at ease. Winston Churchill, forthright as ever, told him that the United States erred in underrating the

36. Condit, *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, pp. 288–93; Samuel F. Wells, Jr, 'America in the "mad" world', *The Wilson Quarterly*, Autumn 1977, Vol. 1, No. 5, pp. 60–1; and David MacIssac. 'The Air Force and strategic thought, 1945–1951'. Working Paper No. 8, International Security Studies Program, The Wilson Center, Washington DC, 1979.

37. *James V. Forrestal diaries*, 13, 16 Sept. 1948 (Princeton University Library, Princeton, New Jersey).

destructive power of the weapon, and that this could only lend dangerous encouragement to the Russians. Sir Stafford Cripps, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, told Forrestal in the course of an official visit to Washington that 'Britain is placing her main reliance on the development of fighter aircraft to ensure the security of Britain. Britain must be regarded as the main base for the deployment of American power and the chief offensive against Russia must be in the air.' When Forrestal himself visited London in mid-November, Prime Minister Attlee told him that 'there is no division in the British public about the use of the atomic bomb—they were all for its use. Even the Church in recent days had publicly taken this position.'[38]

For Bevin the atomic bomb, under American trusteeship, offered the main counterbalance to the ever-present threat of Soviet military power during the cold war. The invitation to transfer the B-29 bombers to Britain was made, and the Truman administration accepted it before its operational plans for waging war were completed and in advance of formulating a coherent strategy of deterrence. Caught unprepared by a crisis for which its conventional forces on the spot were pitifully inadequate, the administration was forced to improvise by bringing its nuclear monopoly into the overall military picture, and the bombers-to-Britain move was the result. Neither Bevin nor the American leaders expected the move to coerce the Russians into calling off the blockade. Not coercion but deterrence was the vaguely conceived objective of the move: deterring the Russians from escalating in response to the airlift. The allies did not operate with a clear conceptualization of either deterrence strategy or coercive diplomacy. Their notions on the use of force and threats of force as instruments of diplomacy were as yet undeveloped and opaque.

While the juggling around of the B-29s may well have had a salutary effect in discouraging Soviet brinkmanship in the air corridors to Berlin and in inhibiting the exploitation of the overwhelming superiority of Soviet ground forces in Germany, it was the airlift that ultimately defeated the blockade and won the day for the West. With the diplomatic deadlock unbroken but accompanied by a marked decline in the perceived probability of war, the Berlin crisis turned, in the last few months of 1949, into a test of resolution and capabilities within fairly stable ground rules. While this test was in progress, Bevin used his formidable authority to counter any weakening or backsliding on the British and the European side. Above all, he was convinced that they must stay the course and resist every temptation to embark on the slippery slope of appeasement. As he pointed out to his Cabinet colleagues, since 1945 it had been repeatedly shown that any concessions to the Soviet Union would be exploited to the detriment of the Western powers and unless they maintained a firm stand in Berlin, their position in Europe would be hopeless.[39] Yielding to Soviet pressure in Berlin, he underlined in an obvious reference to Munich, would lead to further withdrawals and in the end to war. On the other hand, if they maintained a firm attitude, they might reckon on ten years of peace during which the defences of Western Europe might be consolidated.[40]

Berlin, Germany and the cold war

The test of resolution did not end until May 1949, but it ended as Bevin had hoped: the Russians recognized that they could not drive the Western allies out of Berlin and they agreed to lift the year-old blockade round the former German capital. Berlin had

38. Millis, *The Forrestal diaries*, pp. 489–91.
39. Cabinet Minutes (48) 61st Conclusions, Minute 3, 22 Sept. 1948.
40. Cabinet Minutes, (48) 54th Conclusions, Minute 5, 26 July 1948.

been successfully defended despite the precariousness of the Western position there; war had been averted; the airlift had not only been an outstanding technical achievement but a great morale booster for the people of Western Europe. Western unity emerged from the ordeal considerably enhanced and preparations for the establishment of NATO received a great push forward. Most importantly, the Western powers had not sacrificed their long-term plans for Germany for the sake of what could only be temporary relief of Soviet pressure in Berlin. Their plans to make a West German state part of the emergent Western alliance, and to revive the economy of that state within the framework of the European Recovery Programme, had proceeded vigorously and uninterruptedly in the teeth of all Soviet threats and blandishments. The fact that this meant a divided Germany did not unduly disturb Bevin. For, as his biographer observed, 'Bevin preferred a West Germany bound in to the rest of Western Europe to a united Germany which might fall under communist domination or would at least be free to play off West against East. The Berlin experience, however, confirmed his view that there would be no recovery in Europe until confidence that neither a Russian occupation nor a war was inevitable was restored.'[41]

Whether the outcome of this critical cold war confrontation would have been very different had Britain not been so steadfast and had it not been for the toughness and resolution which Bevin brought to bear, there is, of course, no way of knowing. Nor should it be assumed without question that the division of Germany with the anomaly of a small Western enclave isolated in the midst of the Soviet-controlled half of the country was, from the Western point of view, necessarily the best possible outcome of that confrontation. It is at least arguable, as some American officials did, privately, argue at the time, that Berlin was a liability and a strategic trap and that if the division of Germany had to be accomplished in order to seal off the Western half of the country against communist penetration, it was best to take this process to its logical conclusion by quietly withdrawing from the exposed outpost on the other side of the Iron Curtain. After all it was the monumental effort made by the West to save Berlin which, more than any other factor, magnified its importance as a symbol of the cold war and of resistance to Soviet encroachment. It is just conceivable that had it not been for Bevin's insistence on standing firm, Berlin would not have assumed a symbolic value which was so disproportionate with its real importance and that the division of Germany might have assumed a simpler and more logical form. The only point which is now hopefully beyond dispute, and the one underlying this article, is that Britain played a major, independent and highly significant role in the mangement of the Berlin crisis. Far from being a mere appendage to the United States, it exercised, for better or worse, considerable and in some respects decisive influence over the whole course of Western policy during this critical phase in the development of the cold war.

What is even more striking is the discovery that Britain was so much more determined to force the issue in Berlin, more resolute in facing the Soviet challenge head-on, less open to bargaining and compromise, and more willing to accept risks, including the risk of nuclear war, than was its senior partner. Far from restraining and moderating American behaviour, far from acting as the Greeks in America's Roman Empire, the British Labour government was exceedingly hawkish itself and used its influence to stiffen and harden the American posture *vis-à-vis* the Soviet Union. It is in this respect that the historical record is most strikingly at odds with the conventional wisdom on the role played by Britain in the cold war.

41. Alan Bullock, 'Bevin provided the basis for Western security', *The Listener*, 14 Oct. 1948.