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John Kosner

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'Checkmate in Berlin' Review: Breaking the Blockade

After Stalin cut road and rail connections, West Berlin needed thousands of tons of supplies daily.



An American plane brings essential supplies into Berlin's Tempelhof airfield, 1948. PHOTO: HENRY BURROUGHS/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By Edward Kosner

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The occupation of ravaged Berlin by the triumphant Americans, British and Russians in the summer of 1945 inscribed a coda to World War II in Europe, but it was also the first skirmish in the Cold War that in many respects is still going on. For most adult Americans, postwar Berlin is a flickery newsreel of the 1948 Allied airlift, the construction of the wall sealing off the Russian sector in 1961, and its joyous destruction 28 years later as the Soviet empire began to implode. Those fading memories are faint reflections of the dramatic struggle for Berlin, especially in those first years.

At Yalta in February 1945, Winston Churchill, a dying Franklin Roosevelt and the cagey Joseph Stalin carved up Germany, with the Russians taking the eastern half and the Allies dividing up the west. Berlin—isolated in the Soviet zone 100 miles from Germany's internal border—was itself divided in similar fashion. Two rail lines and two autobahns controlled by the Russians afforded the only access to the city from the west. The British and American zones each had an airport—seemingly peripheral at the start, they would each play central roles in the epic siege of Berlin that was to shape the enduring conflict to come.

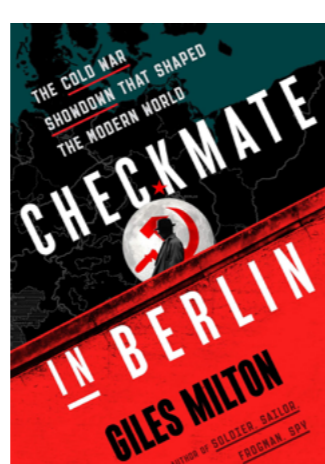
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Checkmate in Berlin: The Cold War Showdown That Shaped the Modern World

By Giles Milton

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Soon a courageous band of American and British military officers would be jousting daily with their obdurate Soviet counterparts over the fate of 2.4 million cold and half-starved West Berliners, while far away in Washington, London and Moscow their superiors schemed for advantage in the fog of a new kind of war over the future of Europe itself.

The British writer Giles Milton brings this epic story to exhilarating life in "Checkmate in Berlin: The Cold War Showdown That Shaped the Modern World," his meticulously researched and crisply written account of those

pivotal early years in divided Berlin. His book is popular narrative history at its very best—evoking the savage rapacity of the Soviet conquerors and unspeakable suffering of the captive Berliners, the plucky resilience of a now all-but-forgotten hero of the American occupation forces, and the brilliant execution of the Allied airlift that broke the Russian blockade of Berlin.

Mr. Milton deftly sketches the players—among them, the pugnacious Yankee Col. Frank "Howlin' Mad" Howley, who ran the show under court-martialed Gen. Lucius Clay, and Gen. William "Tonnage" Tunner, the impresario of the airlift; spade-bearded Walter Ulbricht, Stalin's political stooge in East Germany; the Russian generals Alexander Kotikov and Vasily Sokolovsky, who tormented the Allied commanders at every meeting; and Ernst Reuter, the stalwart anticommunist mayor of West Berlin. The author provides unforgettable vignettes, including the discovery of Hitler's records in his dentist's shattered office; they matched a jawbone found in Hitler's bunker, refuting Stalin's lie that the Führer had somehow escaped alive.

Mr. Milton, the author of 11 other books, is deeply unsympathetic to the Soviets, despite their monumental losses to the Nazis in the war. Inflamed by vodka, the rampaging Russian troops, he writes, raped countless German women and girls—including nurses, all of them nuns—at a Berlin hospital. Under orders, they plundered factories, offices and homes. They took machinery, equipment, furniture and housewares, even wall sockets and door knobs, for shipment back home. In what the author calls "the greatest looting spree in history," more than 15,000 crates of art treasures—Greek statuary and vases, priceless gems, works by Caravaggio, Donatello, Goya, Rubens, Tintoretto, Van Dyke and more—were sent to Moscow. Thousands of German scientists (and their families) were abducted to labor in Russian labs.

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The Allied troops were better behaved. They cursed and cuffed Berliners but rarely killed them, although the Americans shanghaied 1,600 German scientists of their own, including Nazi collaborators like Wernher von Braun. Armed with cigarettes, chocolate and nylons, American GIs and Brits "fratted" with the frauleins rather than raping them, their dalliances more consensual, if mercenary.

But all that was a sideshow to the main event: Stalin's relentless efforts to drive the Allies out of Berlin, a key to his larger strategy to dominate Europe. For years, Howley and Clay absorbed the tirades from Soviet generals. The Russians routinely lied to them, obstructed their movement and trespassed into the Allied zones. From the start, Mr. Milton writes, Howley considered the Soviets adversaries and treated them that way. This caused endless friction with his boss, Clay, who was under orders from Washington to get along with America's World War II ally.

But Howley stuck to his guns, as it were, and the tide turned in his favor. First, an obscure cipher clerk in the Soviet embassy in Ottawa defected and outed a Russian nuclear-spy ring that foreshadowed sensational revelations in the U.S. Then, late in February 1946, George Kennan, the No. 2 at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, sent his momentous "long telegram" to the State Department analyzing Stalin's malign designs on Europe and sketching a strategy of containment. A few weeks later, Churchill ventured to Missouri to give his epochal speech: "From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste on the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the Continent." American policy in Berlin began to mirror Howley's view.

Stalin made the diplomatic wrangling moot 18 months later when the Soviets abruptly sealed off the roads and railways linking Berlin to the west and cut off sources of food, clean water, electricity, coal and medicine from the east. The blockade meant starvation for the citizens of West Berlin and was designed to force the Allies to abandon the capital. "There we were, in a land-locked city," wrote Howley later, "trapped in the Bear's paws."

So began one of the most heroic episodes in the annals of the American military and an exercise of excruciating complexity pulled off with stunning competence—the Berlin Airlift, a turning point in the Cold War.

Mr. Milton tells the story with verve and precision. Howley had calculated earlier that sustaining the people in the Allied zones each day required nearly 2,000 tons of flour, meat, potatoes and other food, plus thousands more tons of coal and other necessities. At the start, the Americans had only a battered fleet of smallish C-47 cargo planes. "It would require 1,800 flights a day to keep the city's inhabitants alive," the author tells us, "with a plane landing every ninety-six seconds at each of the two airports in the Western sectors." With Truman making the command decision, bigger American military planes flew in from bases around the world. An RAF logistics expert pitched in, along with British military and civilian planes and airmen. Tunner, a World War II supply hero, took charge, and the airlift expanded exponentially. Then winter fog enveloped Berlin for weeks, all but cutting the lifeline. The weather finally cleared, and over Easter weekend Tunner staged a propaganda coup, ferrying in 12,941 tons—a record—on 1,398 flights. Stalin soon folded, and the 323-day siege ended in a resonant Allied triumph.

Victory in Berlin led to the formation of NATO, the founding of the West German federal republic—with Konrad Adenauer as its first chancellor—and eventually the unification of a Germany firmly allied with the Western democracies against Russian expansionism: the world as we know it today.

—Mr. Kosner is the author of "It's News to Me," a memoir of his career as the editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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