

The American YAWPⁱ

Chapter 25: The Cold War, The Marshall Plan

In the harsh winter of 1946–1947, famine loomed in much of continental Europe. Blizzards and freezing cold halted coal production. Factories closed. Unemployment spiked. Amid these conditions, the communist parties of France and Italy gained nearly a third of the seats in their respective parliaments. American officials worried that Europe's impoverished masses were increasingly vulnerable to Soviet propaganda. The situation remained dire through the spring, when secretary of state General George Marshall gave an address at Harvard University on June 5, 1947, suggesting that "the United States should do whatever it is able to do to assist in the return of normal economic health to the world, without which there can be no political stability and no assured peace." Although Marshall had stipulated to potential critics that his proposal was "not directed against any country, but against hunger, poverty . . . and chaos," Stalin clearly understood this as an assault against communism in Europe. He saw it as a "Trojan Horse" designed to lure Germany and other countries into the capitalist web.

The European Recovery Program (ERP), popularly known as the Marshall Plan, pumped enormous sums of capital into Western Europe. From 1948 to 1952 the United States invested \$13 billion toward reconstruction while simultaneously loosening trade barriers. To avoid the postwar chaos of World War I, the Marshall Plan was designed to rebuild Western Europe, open markets, and win European support for capitalist democracies. The Soviets countered with their rival Molotov Plan, a symbolic pledge of aid to Eastern Europe. Polish leader Józef Cyrankiewicz was rewarded with a five-year, \$450 million trade agreement from Russia for boycotting the Marshall Plan. Stalin was jealous of Eastern Europe. When Czechoslovakia received \$200 million in American assistance, Stalin summoned Czech foreign minister Jan Masaryk to Moscow. Masaryk later recounted that he "went to Moscow as the foreign minister of an independent sovereign state" but "returned as a lackey of the Soviet Government." Stalin exercised ever tighter control over Soviet "satellite" countries in central and Eastern Europe.

The situation in Germany meanwhile deteriorated. Berlin had been divided into communist and capitalist zones. In June 1948, when U.S., British, and French officials introduced a new currency, the Soviet Union initiated a ground blockade, cutting off rail and road access to West Berlin (landlocked within the Soviet occupation zone) to gain control over the entire city. The United States organized and coordinated a massive airlift that flew essential supplies into the beleaguered city for eleven months, until the Soviets lifted the blockade on May 12, 1949. Germany was officially broken in half. On May 23, the western half of the country was formally renamed the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the eastern Soviet zone became the German Democratic Republic (GDR) later that fall. Berlin, which lay squarely within the GDR, was divided into two sections (and, from August 1961 until November 1989, famously separated by physical walls).

ⁱ Yawp \yôp\ n: 1: a raucous noise 2: rough vigorous language. From Walt Whitman in 1855, "I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world."