

AIR CORRIDOR PAWNS IN 1971

by R.W. Rynerson

It is a common belief by Americans today that with the exception of three big events nothing much happened in Cold War Berlin. These events were the Berlin Blockade, construction of the Berlin Wall and the fall of the Berlin Wall. Of course each of these highly visual dramas was composed of a series of occurrences and there were all sorts of twists and turns in between. The air corridors for travel between West Berlin and West Germany could become a stage for geopolitical theater. Pushed unwillingly onto this stage were individuals.



In 1969 and on into 1972, there were steps forward on the diplomatic side. The new Nixon administration and then the new Brandt government in the Federal Republic of Germany (known as West Germany) wanted to negotiate with the Warsaw Pact adversaries. Henry Kissinger was sitting down for "3-D chess" as East and West Germans began to talk, West Germans negotiated an end to World War II with the Soviet Union, Poland and Czechoslovakia, Soviet and Chinese Communists shot at each other in a border war, Strategic Arms Limitation Talks got underway and the Paris Peace Talks to end the Vietnam War were attracting American media attention. Secretly, approaches were made to mainland China. Oh, and quietly talks at the ambassador level were held by the Four Powers in Berlin.

Four Power talks on the status of Berlin were intentionally low key. After so much history, hopes could not be allowed to be raised too high. And Americans inclined to mistrust the Soviet Union were preoccupied mistrusting the North Vietnamese. Thus the diplomats had leeway in which to work quietly. There were positive signs: when a neo-Nazi visiting the British Sector shot a Soviet soldier, Moscow and East Berlin fired blasts of reasonable and unreasonable complaints, but did not walk out of the talks (as the shooter had hoped). After the October 1969 Warsaw Pact exercise preparing for the "second liberation" of West Berlin, western Allies protested and subsequent exercises did not actually move toward the island city. And one of the last Stalinists was removed

from the chess board: Walter Ulbricht, the East German leader who agitated against being sold out by the Soviets (which is what they were doing on some issues) was replaced.

On the ground, where I was, it seemed like a glacier was calving giant blocks of Cold War ice. In other words, things were moving, but there was a lot more ice remaining. Preoccupied with day-to-day duties and personal lives it was hard to see ourselves as pawns. And the chess metaphor breaks down when one remembers that the pawns were all individuals who might or might not behave as expected.

Soviet and East German negotiating tactics included a background drumbeat of petty harassment. The problem with their approach was that it only was effective if there was a chance that one or more of the pawns would do something unexpected and create a new Berlin Crisis -- or worse.

For example, in October 1970 the western Allies protested a two-hour closure of the central (Hannover) and northern (Hamburg/Bremen) air corridors on the night of 29/30 September. More closures were projected to facilitate one of the -- to that time -- largest combined Warsaw Pact exercises. Operation "Comrades in Arms" showed guests such as Raul Castro that socialist allies were ready to defend against "aggressive imperialist circles" by such means as occupying Hamburg. The Soviets claimed that the closure was directed by junior officers who did not realize that it would cause problems. The West German ambassador in London was shown intelligence that indicated that it was an experiment planned from above.

On February 1st in 1971, the U.S. Mission translated an editorial from influential *Die Welt*: "The harassment which the Federal [West German] President called 'almost a blockade' is unbearable and degrading. It seems that Moscow and East Berlin want to prove that Bonn has to accept all humiliating conditions to obtain the privilege of hegemonial benevolence." Tabloid headlines in that spring: "The signal blinked red" accompanied by telephoto lens shots of East German border guards taking extended smoke breaks by closing autobahn checkpoints.

The nice ladies of the German Red Cross served hot chocolate to stalled motorists and the West Berlin traffic engineers introduced advance warning signs with remote controlled messages to warn low-flying autobahn drivers of the jam ahead. These measures eased the stress on the spot, but not the on-going tension. Most of this was directed at civilians: the Allied military trains moved routinely while the Lord Mayor of West Berlin was taken off of an interzone sleeping car by East German border guards who claimed they could not identify him. The Four-Power air traffic control center continued its work. Planes of Air France, British European Airways and Pan American Airways shuttled to and from western terminals uneventfully.

As negotiations on the Four Power treaty began to speed toward a successful conclusion in mid-1971, the Soviet ambassador made a new demand. In addition to a cultural center, trade office and Aeroflot office in West Berlin, they wanted to open a consulate. Western

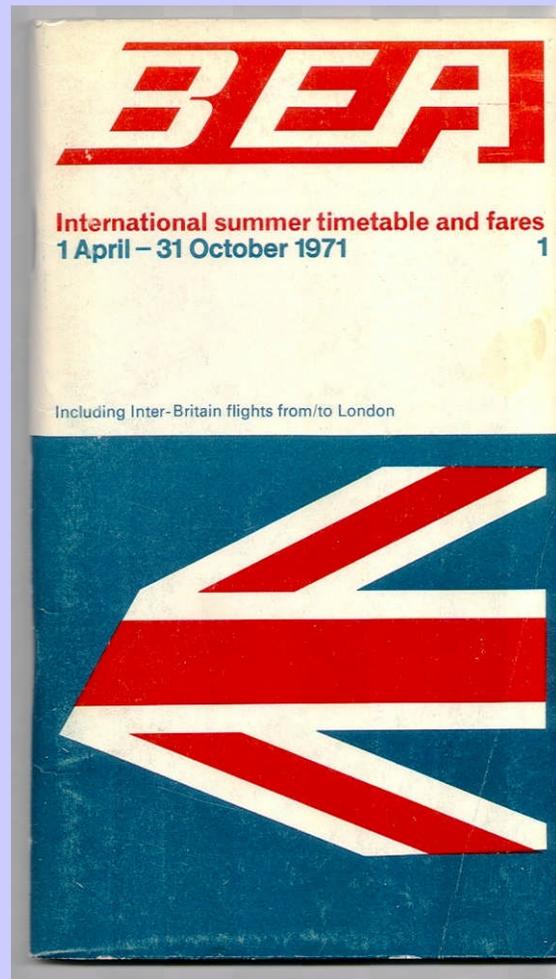
Allies recognized this as a move to further establish the western portion of the city as an island, rather than serving all Berliners at the existing consulate in East Berlin.

To make their points, Soviet negotiations were accompanied by harassment tactics. But what could they do that they and little brother, the German Democratic Republic, (East Germany) were not already doing? Interfering with rail travel would be effective, but the nature of rail dispatching is such that short of a complete shutdown of western travel East Germany's internal network would be disrupted. The Soviets needed something with a low cost that would grab attention, but not violent enough to be disapproved of by the world community. With Chinese pressure on Russian borders, negotiations with the western allies could not be disrupted.

On Saturday, July 24th, 1971, BE1141 departed Berlin-Tempelhof for the 40-minute 0750 flight to Hamburg. Among the passengers on the BAC111 jet were an unlikely pair -- thrown together by Cold War circumstances -- Robert and Michèle. Robert, an American Specialist 5, worked in a special project for Berlin Brigade's G-2 Division. Michèle, a French freshly-graduated school teacher, was in Berlin studying German early childhood education. People who were paid to be suspicious noted ambiguous signs in her story; men in plainclothes asked child care workers about her. That she was witty and charming made them even more suspicious.

Both had a taste for big city exploration and limited times left in their stays in Berlin. Both wanted a breath of fresh air out of their isolated parts of Berlin. They could not openly ride the military trains together; air fares were subsidized by the West German government, so British European Airways' destination Hamburg beckoned (the "Seattle of Germany"). Communicating in a mélange of English, German and French they avoided talk about work and set out to explore Germany's biggest port city.

After an interesting time in a historic home, afternoon was idyllic. Sitting on a hillside lawn in the warm sunlight, they watched ships -- real ships, not the canal barges of Berlin -- and talked about the things people in wartime romances talk about: home, school days, home, career plans, home, etc. It seemed in that golden hour as though they stopped time, rather than facing the coming turn of the calendar page.



On Sunday morning the color drained out of the picture. Headlines in Hamburg papers shouted the news. The Soviet air force would be closing the northern air corridor on Monday -- the day Robert and Michèle were due to fly back to a few more weeks of work.



Much as they might have wanted time to stop, reality crashed around them. In the days before twenty-somethings had credit cards, a weekend trip required strict budgeting. Extra days required extra cash. The alternative of train travel would require paperwork from two different nations' bureaucracy that they did not have. (Air travel for West Berlin was considered to be internal German travel, so all a military traveler needed was a DA31 pass or leave form.)

Anxiously, the young couple digested the news. They concluded that the best course of action was to continue their adventure and see what happened on Monday. Robert could well imagine the team of military and civilian staff whose weekend was being ruined by the Soviet proclamation. Afterward, he pictured the western allies' response as being like a sewing machine in which a complex apparatus moves a tiny needle and thread. By then it was an abstract idea, but on July 25 he and the ambiguous Frenchwoman were at the point of the needle.

It was easy later on to consider that Sunday of uncertainty as a valuable life experience. At the time it was not fun. Thoughts of having to throw themselves on the mercy of the Helmstedt Detachment (Checkpoint Alpha for land travel) or stressed out airline employees kept intruding.

On Monday morning the only alarms were the wake-up calls. Headlines affirmed that the air corridor would NOT be closed. The U.S. Air Force announced that its planes would be in the corridor. The Royal Air Force announced that they would have a jet in the corridor. The French stated that they would have a plane standing by in case it was needed. The Soviet air force found a way to back down; their chess move having reminded all concerned how fragile access was for West Berlin.

Robert was relieved. (He later admitted that he was trying to channel Humphrey Bogart's part in *Casablanca* and do the thinking for both of them.) Michèle was steaming. Why? It turned out that her father was an officer in the French Air Force and she was steaming

at her government's timidity. It was typical of the French civilian leadership of that era and the northern air corridor was not handy to French bases, so it did not surprise Robert. For a few minutes witty and charming was supplanted by stern thoughts and hints of notes of *La Marseillaise*.

BE1150, the load on its 99-seat BAC Super 111 having been lightened by the burden lifted from its passengers' minds, rose from Hamburg-Fuhlsbüttel Flughafen as the 1105 flight and turned toward Berlin. Any lingering concerns were addressed by reflecting that in 1971 the senior BEA pilots -- with their brush mustaches and scarves -- probably could have made the trip in the dark with people shooting at them. And they likely had done that.

Less than two months later, the Four Power negotiations came to a successful conclusion. By then, the young people whose lives were interrupted by geopolitics were back in their respective homelands. They picked up where their pre-Berlin lives had broken off -- friends and colleagues neither little noted nor long remembered their part as pawns or the treaty itself.

=====

Postscript: What became of the pawns?

As Soviet ambassador Pjotr Abrasimov later observed, "all's well that ends well." The Berliners who put up with this sort of thing since the Blockade soon received some benefits; in hindsight the treaties in the 3-D chess game led to the fall of the Berlin Wall. The world's attention turned toward China.

Robert returned to Berlin for reunions in the new millennium. On a trip in 2002 a Turkish immigrant to Berlin sneered "how [typically] arrogant of you Americans to have your reunion in Berlin. [Raising his voice] **What have you to do with Berlin?**" The critic had arrived in 1994. On the same trip, in a café a middle-aged German woman came up, crying, hugged the nonplussed veteran and thanked him for being a "hero". In civilian life, Robert's career as a transportation planner included incidents where street closures did not seem very serious in comparison to Four Power access struggles.

Michèle as an educator always looked to the future. Still witty and charming in the new millennium, her steel showed in her commitment toward improving education and in the successful release of her well-regarded book on the subject. As for writing about the past, she said (in German), "just get the accent mark over my name pointed in the right direction!"

British European Airways became part of British Airways.

Berlin became... Berlin.

For background on the China-Russia border conflict that brought the Soviet negotiators to the 3-D chess game, read *War Between Russia and China* by Harrison E. Salisbury (1969).

For further information on this period when Americans thought nothing was happening read *Dealing With the Devil* by M. E. Sarotte (2001). Or, visit www.berlin1969.com .

The Soviet Air Force Song: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mQioO4CZ7z0>

The United States Air Force Song: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sHOq6SI9u38>

The Royal Air Force Song: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GV3hscgyuAs>

The French Air Force Song: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LTcjp2zuTgI>

BAC 111 sounds for flight simulator: <https://youtu.be/FPKbvNrC0Zg>

Last flight

of the last type of BAC 111: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YGUu0s5URVE>

Air Corridor humor: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1LuI6umZut0>

-- *rwr*

July 2017