

1948

## The Berlin Situation

Joseph C. Harsch

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

---

### Recommended Citation

Harsch, Joseph C. (1948) "The Berlin Situation," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 1 : No. 2 , Article 3.  
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol1/iss2/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu](mailto:repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu).

**RESTRICTED**

## **THE BERLIN SITUATION**

*Joseph C. Harsch*

Mr. President, Gentlemen:

What I have to tell you I think perhaps will be of more value as illustrating the way the journalistic mind operates than from the point of view of substance.

I am on vacation. My sources of information in Jamestown, Rhode Island are not what they would normally be if I were operating in Washington. I have been sitting up here simply trying to think about what is going on. I cannot offer you authoritative information. My normal work is the process of attempting to evaluate the events of the day in world affairs. I will attempt to do that today and I warn you to look upon it, not as the thinking process of a man who is recognized as an official authority in his subject, but as the thinking process of the journalist who is trying to convey to the public in general a sense of perspective about events. You may find in what I have to say, perhaps, the reason why the public doesn't always respond accurately or intelligently to what is going on.

There has been recently a most curious turn of events in world affairs. I must be careful I know, not to assume "*post-hoc, ergo propter-hoc.*" I know it is very easy to say "A happened, B happened, B happened because of A." I cannot prove the *sequitur* in this week's (5-11 Sept.) sequence of events. I assume that there *is* a cause and effect relationship, however, and I leave it to you to decide for yourself whether I am right or not.

---

Mr. Harsch is a well-known radio commentator and foreign news correspondent. At present he is news analyst for the Columbia Broadcasting System.

## **RESTRICTED**

We have two things that have happened. You have the French crisis. With the best will in the world, neither our government nor the government of France has been able to give the French people a "cake" to divide which contains an equivalent sum total of food and goods in comparison with the "cake" they enjoyed in pre-war years. The government of the Center has been unable to divide that "cake" to the satisfaction of all the people of France and now the government of the Center is apparently in its death throes, with DeGaulle coming on the scene standing in the wings, waiting for his cue to come on the stage. The degree of uncertainty as to what will happen when DeGaulle takes power derives from these two things: the progressive weakness of the French government of the Center, and the impending arrival of General DeGaulle, which has developed only over the past ten days.

I would submit to you that there is, in this, a very considerable lesson for us to study and to heed. I think we are responsible, to a large degree, for what has happened in France. I think we could have done very much more than we have done to avoid it. And now we see, in a rather dramatic form, the consequences of the weakness in France on another stage of this world power contest.

For about three months the Western cause has enjoyed what Winston Churchill called a "favorable inclination"; the favorable inclination of our fortunes has been most marked. Then we got into this Berlin situation. From a military point of view, of course, the Western position there is completely untenable. It is untenable if you predicate a willingness of the Russians to resort to war in the last extreme as a means of settling the issue in their favor.

I have no means of knowing whether the Russians are ready to go to that degree or not. My own inclination is to assume that the Russians have no serious idea of allowing affairs to come to the point of war at this stage of history. Whether they are willing to do so ten or twenty-five years from now is any man's guess. I assume that they are not ready for war, that they have no intention whatever of going to war, that Winston Churchill put the story most accurately when he said in his Fulton speech that the Russians are interested, not in war, but in "the fruits of war". They are pressing for the fruits of war—short of war.

If that is correct—and I take it as my premise—then the military untenability of our position in Berlin probably ceases to be the significant fact. The significant fact is that over the past two or three months of this Berlin crisis, the West has been developing an increasingly strong position from the points of view of politics and propaganda, of economics and cultural influence.

We have been gaining strength, gaining in position, in two significant manners. One is in Germany itself, where the demonstration of the ability to put better than 4,000 tons of goods a day into Berlin by air, and thereby deny to the Russians a quick victory in Berlin, has had a profound effect on the whole German situation.

The Russians have been building, for over a year, a strong propaganda position in Germany. They have done enormous damage to that propaganda position of their own by exposing themselves to a test which they could not solve quickly. Had they solved the Berlin crisis in a matter of a week or ten days, obviously their propaganda position in Germany would have been improved by the old reason that nothing succeeds like success. But the thing has failed; they have put themselves in the position, before the German people, of

## **RESTRICTED**

attempting to deny food and the other good things of life to a very large number of Germans.

There is no doubt that they have enormously reduced their potential popularity, their political acceptance, in the minds of the Germans of the city of Berlin. They have, also, in the process of failing to achieve a quick victory, done something that we ourselves were not able to do before—to bring the Western Germans towards the point of being ready to accept a Western German government. That cause of ours was never acceptable to the Germans of the West until the Russians by their behavior in Berlin, made it seem the lesser of two evils. You now have a considerable willingness on the part of Western Germans to proceed with the German government. In other words, the Russians have induced, by their actions, one of the two things that they hoped to avert by the siege of Berlin.

The Russian purpose, we assume, was two-fold; either to force us from Berlin (us of the West in general) or to force us to abandon our plans for a Western German government—neither of which they have been able to succeed in doing. On the contrary they have promoted, by their behavior, the two things they wanted to destroy. In that respect, Russian weakness has increased as the siege of Berlin continues.

In another, and equally important respect the duration of the siege of Berlin has contributed to Russian weakness in another theatre, that is, in their satellite area. When the war ended, Russia enjoyed very real popularity in the satellite zone. I was in several of those countries last summer—Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Yugoslavia and Austria. And I can assure you that as late as last summer, and in spite of the fact that the Russian Bear had already begun to scratch a little and to squeeze a little too hard, it was still

a much more desirable thing, in the eyes of the Eastern Europeans, than the memory of what they had been through during the war.

I think it is important to remember, in evaluating events in that part of the world, that the heel of the Gestapo pressed harder on the necks of those people than anything they had experienced in modern times—pressed, I think, even harder than the Bear is squeezing now.

There is a distinction between the tyranny of the Gestapo and the tyranny of the Russian secret police. It is the source, I think, of the greatest single element of strength in the Russian position; and that is the absence from the Russian propaganda armory of the doctrine of racialism which was so present with the Germans. The German came into those countries and he treated the people as inferiors. The Germans looked upon the Slavs as being a slave race. They treated them as cattle. They made it very clear that they regarded them as inferior peoples.

Now the Russian comes in; he beats a man over the head, or shoots him, or sends him to Siberia because he does not accept the true faith as preached by the Cominform, or because he thinks that perhaps Poland should have a little more independence from Moscow, but *not* because the man is a German, a Pole or a Hungarian. People are not persecuted in that area today because of their nationality or race. They are persecuted because of their political beliefs. That is a very different thing and it makes the process of developing resistance to the Russian tyranny a slower one.

It is less easy to dramatize the Russian menace in the minds of Eastern Europeans than it was the German menace for the simple

## **RESTRICTED**

reason that the Russians are not inhibited by that racial doctrine which was the greatest weakness in the whole German position.

The people in Eastern Europe looked upon the Russians as their deliverers from German tyranny. There was a great deal that was specious about the assumption that the Russians liberated them. Russian propaganda, of course, has emphasized that point most heavily and sometimes has forced its acceptance more by pressure than by reason. However, there was, as I say, up until last summer at least, and I assume that there is a good deal of it now, a strong feeling that the Russian was their true defender against the Teuton who has been the exploiter of the peoples of Eastern Europe for about 1,000 years.

You must remember that Charlemagne's empire extended roughly to the present demarcation line between East and West, that is, up to about the Iron Curtain and the difference isn't very much. From the days of Charlemagne until now, a period of 1,000 years, the German has been pushing out eastward into the Slavic lands.

The Prussians, remember, were originally a Slavic tribe who were Germanized by the Germans, and Berlin was a Slavic city. There is still a little community south of Berlin where the native peasant speaks a Slavic tongue. That is, almost everything lying beyond the present Iron Curtain has been conquered over a period of a thousand years by the Germans who have pushed out, colonized, and exploited—leaving a tremendous residue of resentment against the German, a fear of the German, a desire not to allow the German to come back and reestablish the empire which, in effect, he held throughout all of Eastern and Southeastern Europe in the period leading up to this war.

There you are dealing with the element of greatest strength in the Russian position and it was at that very element of strength that they themselves struck by their German policy. They themselves have contributed to the undermining of their greatest source of strength by the very importance they have attached to winning German good will. The Russian has sought German good will with such obvious desperation that he has exposed to his satellites the fact that he apparently values the German above the Pole, the Czech, the Yugoslav, the Hungarian or the Bulgarian.

Again I must be careful not to assume that "because it happens after, it happens because of"—and I may be assuming a sequence there that is not altogether justified. But it seems to me that the Russian, by making such extensive efforts as he has over the past summer to win the good will of the Germans, has contributed mightily to the breeding of the troubles in his satellite zone which have come out in Tito's heterodoxy in Yugoslavia and in Gomulka's heresy in Poland. You have had troubles arising because the satellite Slav is beginning to doubt that the Russian is really his true champion against the German.

I want to say that, in a broader sense, I think what the Russians have done, we have done too. Both we and the Russians have natural allies. I think, probably, both we and the Russians have an inclination to doubt the strength and reliability of our allies. Since the war we have both done one thing in common. We both hesitated as to which way we would play our European game. The Russians officially base their European policy on the satellite system. They pose as the champion of the satellite against the German. The satellites are their blood brothers in the great new religion of Communism. Yet, as a matter of fact, they have vacillated between that policy and a policy of winning over the German at the

## **RESTRICTED**

expense of the satellites. Of course every Pole knows what would happen to Poland if at any moment there should be a Russian-German alignment. It has happened many times in history and every time it has meant the partition of Poland. Russia has always been willing, in the past, to throw her Slavic "little brothers" to the German wolves for the sake of an alignment with Germany. There has been that vacillation which has, in itself, induced a greater weakness—resentment, opposition—and now the satellite system is not what it could have been if Russia had played its cards the other way, and had consistently and honestly been the champions of the Slavic peoples against the Germans.

The U. S. S. R. hasn't played its cards that way, and the result is the protraction of the siege of Berlin, which came very close to a climax over last week end (5 Sept. 1948). Then there was every reason to believe that the Russians, in an intolerably weak position, were on the verge of recognizing the necessity of capitulating to us on the issue of Berlin. I use the word capitulate advisedly because any bargain we might make over Berlin, any concession we might give them in return for the lifting of the siege, might lead merely to a repetition of the present condition.

The fact is that the Russian purpose in the battle of Berlin was one of two things; either to stop the formation of a Western German government or to drive us out of Berlin. A Russian failure to achieve one of those two purposes from a siege makes it a failure. If they haven't achieved either of their major purposes, then the operation has been a failure. And the Russian operation would be a failure if the siege were lifted tomorrow.

The failure would have to be qualified if we gave them any large or substantial concession for it. There is no evidence that at any stage we have been ready to give them any such concession. I am

**RESTRICTED**

sure in my own mind that they were on the verge last week-end (5 Sept. 1948) of accepting the necessity of lifting the siege without either up-setting the Western plans for Western Germany or causing our withdrawal or retirement from Berlin. The Russian position had become increasingly weak and that weakness was about to be reflected in a political decision which would be based on the realities of the power position.

But something went very decidedly wrong from our point of view. It didn't work out that way. The Russians, instead of lifting the siege on the basis of an agreement which had apparently been worked out almost to the last detail, suddenly became difficult and postponed the resolution of the Berlin crisis.

I would submit to you that the obvious reason why they have done so is the development of the crisis in France. The French governmental crisis gave the Russians the opportunity that they had probably been praying for. Here was a sudden disclosure of a weakness on our side which counter-balanced the two great elements of weakness on the Russian side. They had been having troubles with *their* satellite system. I don't like at all to imply that we have a satellite system; but I suppose that we might as well frankly admit that, in effect, we have been building a satellite system. We like to think of it in terms of alliances, but ours was operating more effectively than the Russians' up until the French crisis.

Now I think the French crisis results from a mistake on our part, very much like the mistake the Russians made in their satellite system. We have never been able really to set upon one course of action. We have vacillated, too. We have had our system of alliances which we have built as best we can. It is difficult for us because we are not accustomed to that kind of thing. We have no background or experience in building a strong system of alliances.

## RESTRICTED

It is a new field we are moving into, uneasily, and with a good many mistakes as we go along.

There has also been in this country a strong tendency to think perhaps it would be cheaper and easier to base our European policy on Germany rather than on Western Europe. That has manifested itself repeatedly in the urge that develops in Washington to stop the dismantling of German factories, to increase the level of industry and particularly to brush aside the arguments which the French have repeatedly made against doing these various things. That is, we have been torn between two courses of action; one a strong Western European policy and the other a strong German policy.

We, like the Russians, have assumed that we could perhaps solve our satellite problems, or subordinate our satellite problems to everything else if we could just win Germany to our side. Thus you have this great tug-of-war over Germany which, on the Russian side, has given Russia trouble in her satellite area; and on our side, has contributed quite significantly, I believe, to this present French crisis which could not have come at a more unwelcome moment.

The breaking of the French crisis at this particular moment of course means that it is almost impossible for the French Official, whoever he may be, in Berlin or in Russia to cooperate fully and adequately with the American and the British representatives in those places. How does he know that if DeGaulle comes in tomorrow, DeGaulle will want him to act that way? We don't know what line DeGaulle is going to take. I know of no reason to assume that DeGaulle's accession to power in France is going to be a disaster. It may end in greatly strengthening the French sector of the western front. On the other hand, I know of no reason to be sure that it *will* be that way. It could be the other way. We know that

the Communists in France have promoted this condition as best they can. The Communists must figure that it will benefit them to have DeGaulle come to power. Whether they are right or wrong only time will tell.

The moment DeGaulle appeared on the verge of coming to power, at that very moment the Russians apparently sat down with themselves and said, "All right, do we have to give up the battle of Berlin or don't we?" At that particular moment they were apparently ready to admit defeat on that one battlefield, but obviously, on no other. I'm sure, that if they had lost in Berlin, we would have felt the strangle hold on us at some other point almost instantly.

That French crisis saved them. It gave them an opportunity. It exposed a weakness which they could exploit, and which they *have* exploited.

Now for us, the lesson is that it is risky to try to play two policies, diametrically in conflict, such as a Western European policy, and a German policy. We can base our European course on Germany or on Western Europe; but we can't base it on both. We tried to have both, and we have succeeded in getting ourselves in trouble.

We have had a congenital tendency for a good many years to discount the French, to think that they were difficult and too brilliant to be sound. We have thought of them as complaining and as one thing or another. I don't need to outline the elements of our attitude towards the French, but the plain basic fact of the matter, which I think we have under-valued, is that France *is* Western Europe.

## RESTRICTED

We could have a strategic system which began at the English channel. You, not I, are the authorities on how strong or weak such a system could be. I would hate to think of our attempting a 20 year strategic power contest with the Russians if our bases were all on this side of the English channel. If we are going to have *any* position on the continent of Europe at all, there must be a strong France in that position. We can't have a strong France unless we are prepared to attempt to defend the Rhine and unless we are prepared to take into our calculations some realization of how the Frenchmen feel toward the Germans, which is the Western European counterpart of how the satellite countries feel toward the Germans on the other side.

We have tried to play it both ways. Our vacillation contributed to a French crisis which was Russia's golden opportunity in the battle of Berlin and here we are. I don't know how it is going to come out. I haven't any idea. It is going to be extremely interesting. I am sure that we have just missed the first major Western victory in the cold war.

I think it should have come this week (5-11 September 1948). The fact that it hasn't come seems to me like the battle of the Bulge. I think we have been caught by surprise. The Russians have exploited a weakness in our lines as swiftly and as quickly as Von Rundstedt exploited the weakness in the American front in the battle of the Bulge.

Now we must re-group; and in this re-grouping I, for one, think that we should give a little more careful thought to the position of France. It is a pity that we are going to have to do this with a France which is going through a transition in a very uncertain way. I don't know how we are going to react to DeGaulle. We

**RESTRICTED**

haven't had good relations with him ever. There has always been trouble between DeGaulle and Washington, and it is going to be extremely difficult for us to cooperate with General DeGaulle as the head of the French government. It could have been much easier for us to work out our relations with France under a Schumann or even a Marie. Those are people who understand our language quite well, better, I am sure, than does General DeGaulle. Now, we are going to have to do it the other way.

---

Note: This is a digest of the transcribed remarks of Mr. Harsh.