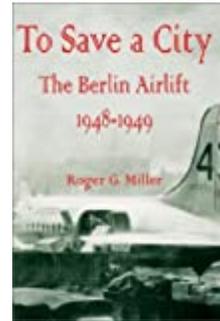




**Roger G. Miller.** *To Save a City: The Berlin Airlift, 1948-1949.* College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2000. Xvi + 253 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-89875-805-4.



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## Drops of Water on Stone

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Major General William H. Tunner, the architect of the Berlin Airlift of 1948-1949, described his philosophy on the airlift in these oft-quoted words: “The actual operation of a successful airlift is about as glamorous as drops of water on stone. There’s no frenzy, no flap, just the inexorable process of getting the job done” (p. 90). Much the same can be said about Roger Miller’s *To Save a City: The Berlin Airlift, 1948-1949*. An historian with the U.S. Air Force History and Museums Program, Miller forsakes much of the glamor and drama associated with the blockade and airlift, preferring instead to provide a detailed account of how the airlift actually worked, a “nuts and bolts” history as he colloquially calls it (p. xiii). To construct such a narrative, Miller consults a wide array of archival materials, examining documents from the National Archives, the Library of Congress, and the U.S. Air Force Historical Agency. While he is largely successful in reconstructing the logistics that made the airlift a reality, the ultimate outcome of his exertions is nevertheless unsatisfying for the professional historian.

A large part of the problem is that much of Miller’s

tale is familiar. His first chapter, which is an overview of the international events leading to the outbreak of the Berlin Blockade, is indicative in this regard. Miller’s take on the beginning of the Cold War (and thus the reasons for the Blockade) is evident in the first line of his first chapter: “the Berlin Crisis of 1948 had its origins in the dark mind of Joseph Stalin” (p. 3). Throughout the rest of this chapter, and indeed the rest of the book, it becomes clear that Miller’s understanding of the origins of the Cold War is heavily influenced by the neo-orthodoxy school of Cold War historiography. Led by John Gaddis, who is extensively cited in the opening chapter, this school draws upon recently released documents of from Soviet Union to resuscitate the 1950s charge that the Soviet dictator was responsible for the Cold War.[1] Miller concedes the revisionist case that Stalin was understandably interested in a buffer zone in Eastern Europe given the Soviet experience in World War I and World War II. But he argues that Stalin’s brutality in carrying out his policy aims undermined any moral or logical claims that the Russians may have enjoyed. Miller also contends that Stalin never seriously entertained any thoughts about a neutral Germany, and worked from the outset to sab-

otage the Western occupation zones. As Miller writes, Stalin “expected to establish Soviet dominance in the eastern occupation zone and then undermine the British position in its zone. When after a year or two the United States withdrew, nothing would stand in the way of a united Germany under communist control within the Soviet orbit” (pp. 12-13).

Miller’s interpretation of the origins of the Cold War (and hence the Blockade) is important because it enables him later to champion the Airlift as a righteous cause, an heroic effort by Americans to save a desperate people from oppression. In this regard, it is interesting to note that Miller does not discuss Carolyn Eisenberg’s excellent work, *Drawing the Line*, although he lists it in his bibliography.[2] Eisenberg’s heavily documented study offers a far different spin on the origins of the Cold War. Eisenberg charges the United States with being more interested in rehabilitating German strength for economic purposes than in preserving a wartime alliance with a willing Soviet Union. Rather than viewing the United States as acting defensively in the face of Soviet intimidation, Eisenberg faults the United States for violating the Yalta and Potsdam accords and embarking on a reckless course to revive German might. While Eisenberg’s study is far from objective, its radically different perspective helps illuminate the ideological position that Miller adopts and develops throughout the rest of his narrative.

Having framed the Berlin Blockade as part of Stalin’s effort to preserve and enhance Soviet influence in Germany, Miller then moves onto the meat of his narrative, the Airlift itself. Miller places the Berlin Airlift within the larger history of American air transport, nicely drawing on previous work in the development of the U.S. global air transport system. In doing so, he outlines the development of Military Air Transport Services and the introduction of new aircraft such as the C-47 and C-54 in the system. Miller demonstrates how these developments led to an organizational rivalry over control of the Airlift and, eventually, the arrival of William H. Tunner, the inspirational leader who transformed the nature and pace of the Airlift. Tunner’s dream was to land a plane every three minutes. In striving to achieve this goal, he emphasized the importance of precision and timing. For example, any plane under his system that was unable to land during its first attempt was sent back west. In this way, Tunner avoided the “stacking” of aircraft that could bring the airlift to a halt. Tunner’s philosophy was vindicated in the famous Easter Parade of April 1949, during which the Airlift transported almost 13,000 tons of cargo in a twenty-four-hour period. By the middle of the spring,

it had become apparent to the Soviets that their gambit had failed, and they began looking for ways to extricate themselves from the fiasco. In May 1949, an agreement was reached to end the Airlift, although it continued until September for good measure.

Much of this is told in a lively tone. The problem with Miller’s handling of the Airlift is that, as in the first chapter, much of this has been told before and in livelier tones. Thomas Parrish’s *Berlin in the Balance* and, Ann and John Tusa’s *The Berlin Airlift*, to name two popular treatments, narrate the logistical complexities of the Airlift while embedding their narratives in far more compelling stories of the international context.[3] That Miller’s account is drier likely stems from his desire to focus on the “nuts and bolts” of the Airlift, and thus relegate much of the political and personal drama to the background. For example, rather than describe the impact of the Blockade on Berliners (something that *The Berlin Airlift* does particularly well), Miller opts instead to detail the benefits and problems that particular aircraft, especially the C-54, brought to the Airlift. While interesting in their own right, such additions do not significantly alter our understanding of the Airlift or its impact on world affairs. Nor do they make, it must be said, for particularly riveting reading, although Miller does the best he can.

But these are issues that professional historians value, and there are several clues that suggest that professional historians are not Miller’s target audience. Indeed, even a cursory reading of *To Save a City* suggests that the book is intended primarily for Air Force veterans and those interested in the Air Force. In his preface, Miller confides as much, when he notes that the work began as a commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Airlift. In the preface, he also thanks the Berlin Airlift Veterans Association and the Berlin Airlift Historical Foundation, two organizations that “loomed large in the preparation of this book” (p. xvi). Another clue can be found in the appendix. The appendix contains two tables, one of the tonnage by month (quite expected), the other a list of the personnel who died during the Airlift (quite unexpected). Moreover, in several places throughout the text, Miller seems to address and adopt the perspective of a military man. His depiction of the arrival of Navy jets to help in the Airlift is particularly instructive in this regard: “it was weather typical of Germany in November, but seemed to have been provided to welcome the navy. Tunner met the airplane, and he later wrote that it was difficult to tell who was more embarrassed, the navy officers in dress uniforms and spit-polished shoes concerned about stepping onto the flooded ground or the air force

general standing calf-deep in water trying to maintain his dignity” (p. 165).

If this is indeed the case, then it is unfair to judge *To Save a City* by conventional academic standards. It is quite possible that the book, with its emphasis on logistical operations, will be a nostalgic hit among Airlift veterans. The book is likewise valuable to those interested in military air history. I would, therefore, recommend the book to Air Force veterans and those fascinated by the logistics of air transport. But for those interested in the political, diplomatic, and/or cultural aspects of the Blockade and Airlift, I would recommend looking elsewhere.

Notes:

[1]. The neo-orthodox view existed before the end of the Cold War, but has gained serious steam since 1989. See John Gaddis’s seminal work, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (New York: Oxford University

Press, 1997).

[2]. Carolyn Eisenberg, *Drawing the Line: the American Decision to Divide Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[3]. Thomas Parrish, *Berlin in the Balance, 1945-1949: The Blockade, the Airlift, the First Major Battle of the Cold War* (Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley, 1998); and, Ann and John Tusa, *The Berlin Airlift* (New York: Atheneum, 1988).

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