

The Cold War in Europe: The Iron Curtain Descends

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

As the Cold War began, George Kennan and other U.S. policymakers promoted a containment strategy to deal with the Soviet Union in Europe and communist movements around the world. Implementing a global foreign policy based on containment, however, would be difficult. During the mid-1950s, the United States was linked—militarily and economically—to a European continent divided between Western capitalism and Eastern communism.

This tutorial examines the Cold War in Europe in five parts:

1. The Iron Curtain

George Kennan's belief that the United States should pursue a foreign policy of **containment** toward the Soviet Union was reinforced in a speech by Great Britain's former prime minister, **Winston Churchill**.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

George Kennan

U.S. State Department official and Soviet expert whose 8,000-word “Long Telegram” reinforced American suspicions of the Soviet Union and laid the foundations for the Cold War American foreign policy of containment.

Winston Churchill

Prime minister of Great Britain from 1940 to 1945, who led his country through World War II; member of the Allied Powers’ “Big Three” leaders.



TERM TO KNOW

Containment

The U.S. strategy that sought to limit the expansion of communism during the Cold War. During a March 1946 speech at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri, Churchill referred to an “iron curtain” that divided Europe between a “free” West and an “unfree” East. He indicated that this curtain had been lowered into place by the Soviet Union:

Winston Churchill, “Iron Curtain” Speech

“A shadow has fallen upon the scenes so lately lighted by the Allied victory (in Europe) . . .

From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the Continent. Behind that line lie all the capitals of the ancient states of Central and Eastern Europe. Warsaw, Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade, Bucharest, and Sofia, all these famous cities and the populations around them lie in what I must call the Soviet sphere, and all are subject in one form or another, not only to Soviet influence but to a very high and, in many cases, an increasing measure of control from Moscow . . . The Communist parties, which were very small in all these Eastern States of Europe, have been raised to pre-eminence and power far beyond their numbers and are seeking everywhere to obtain totalitarian control . . . An attempt is being made by the Russians in Berlin to build up a quasi-Communist party in their zone of Occupied Germany by showing special favors to groups of left-wing German leaders . . .

Whatever conclusions may be drawn from these facts—and facts they are—this is certainly not the Liberated Europe we fought to build up. Nor is it one which contains the essentials of permanent peace.”



THINK ABOUT IT

To what does Churchill refer when he speaks of a “shadow”?



BRAINSTORM

In what ways does Churchill’s speech support Kennan’s claims about the expansionist tendencies of the Soviet Union?

Churchill’s speech reinforced American support for a prolonged ideological struggle against the Soviet Union. One year later, this commitment to containment was tested for the first time.

2. The Truman Doctrine

World War II devastated once-powerful nations (e.g., Great Britain) and caused political unrest in countries that had been occupied by Nazi Germany. Both of these outcomes were evident in southeastern Europe in 1947.

During World War II, Greece was occupied by Germany. When the Nazi regime collapsed, Great Britain sent military and financial aid to the Greek monarchy. Civil war soon broke out between the monarchy and left-wing forces (including Greek communists). In a stunning announcement in March 1947, Great Britain indicated that it could no longer afford to provide financial support to the Greek monarchy and withdrew from the conflict.

At the same time, Turkey was being pressured by the U.S.S.R. to grant it greater access to the Dardanelles and Bosphorus straits, which connect the Black Sea to the Mediterranean. Western European nations, including Great Britain and France, considered the straits geopolitically significant as a gateway to Turkey and the Middle East. If the Soviet Union gained control of the straits, communism might spread through the Middle East.



DID YOU KNOW

Turkey (including the Dardanelles and Bosphorus straits) provided access to Middle Eastern oil. By the end of World War II, Western Europe obtained 75% of its oil from the Middle East.

Unable to maintain its influence in the region, Great Britain asked the United States to fill the power vacuum. President **Harry S. Truman** obliged by asking Congress to provide financial and military assistance to Greece and Turkey to enable them to counter communist infiltration.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Harry S. Truman

Democratic U.S. president who took office after Franklin Roosevelt's death in 1945 and remained in office until 1953; navigated the decision to drop the atomic bomb on Japan and the first years of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Rather than lecture Congress and the American people on the intricacies of Greek politics or the importance of a stable oil supply for Western Europe, Truman justified his support for Greece and Turkey in terms similar to those used by Churchill in his "iron curtain" speech. The following is an excerpt from an address he made to Congress in March 1947:

President Truman, Speech to Congress, March 1947

"At the present moment in world history nearly every nation must choose between alternative ways of life. The choice is too often not a free one.

Should we fail to aid Greece and Turkey in this fateful hour, the effect will be far-reaching to the West as well as to the East.

The seeds of totalitarian regimes are nurtured by misery and want. They spread and grow in the evil soil of poverty and strife. They reach their full growth when the hope of a people for a better life has died. We must keep that hope alive.

The free peoples of the world look to us for support in maintaining their freedoms.

If we falter in our leadership, we may endanger the peace of the world — and we shall surely endanger the welfare of our own nation.

Great responsibilities have been placed upon us by the swift movement of events.

I am confident that the Congress will face these responsibilities squarely."



THINK ABOUT IT

1. According to Truman, why should the United States come to the aid of Greece and Turkey?
2. In what ways are Truman and Churchill's views of communism and the Soviet Union similar?

The president's speech to Congress outlined what came to be known as the **Truman Doctrine**, which became the bedrock of U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War.



TERM TO KNOW

Truman Doctrine

First expressed in a Congressional address by President Truman; insisted that the United States was obliged to support anti-communist regimes and forces throughout the world.

George Kennan's "Long Telegram" called for support of containment within foreign policy circles. The Truman Doctrine publicized America's commitment to containment. Truman stated, "I believe that it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures." These words indicated that the United States would be a permanent presence on the world stage. By offering support to "free peoples" everywhere, the Truman Doctrine opened the door to American intervention across the globe.



DID YOU KNOW

Following Truman's speech, Congress granted \$400 million in aid to Greece and Turkey.

3. The Marshall Plan

The economic reconstruction of Europe was another key element of the U.S. containment policy. At the end of World War II, the American economy was thriving. Between 1939 and 1945, the gross national product (GNP) increased from \$886 million to \$135 billion.

At the same time, Western Europe struggled to recover from the war. As a result, the political situation in some nations became unstable.

➞ **EXAMPLE** In 1947, communist parties in France and Italy made significant gains.



Hungry civilians in West Germany protest the lack of food and other supplies in March 1947. The sign reads “We want COAL, We want BREAD.” Note the ruined building in the background and other evidence of wartime devastation.

Europe’s dire economic situation—and the advance of European communism—led President Truman, along with Secretary of State **George C. Marshall**, to propose the European Recovery Program (popularly known as the **Marshall Plan**) to Congress.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

George C. Marshall

U.S. secretary of state who, along with President Truman, proposed to Congress a multibillion-dollar economic recovery program to rebuild Europe after World War II.



TERM TO KNOW

Marshall Plan

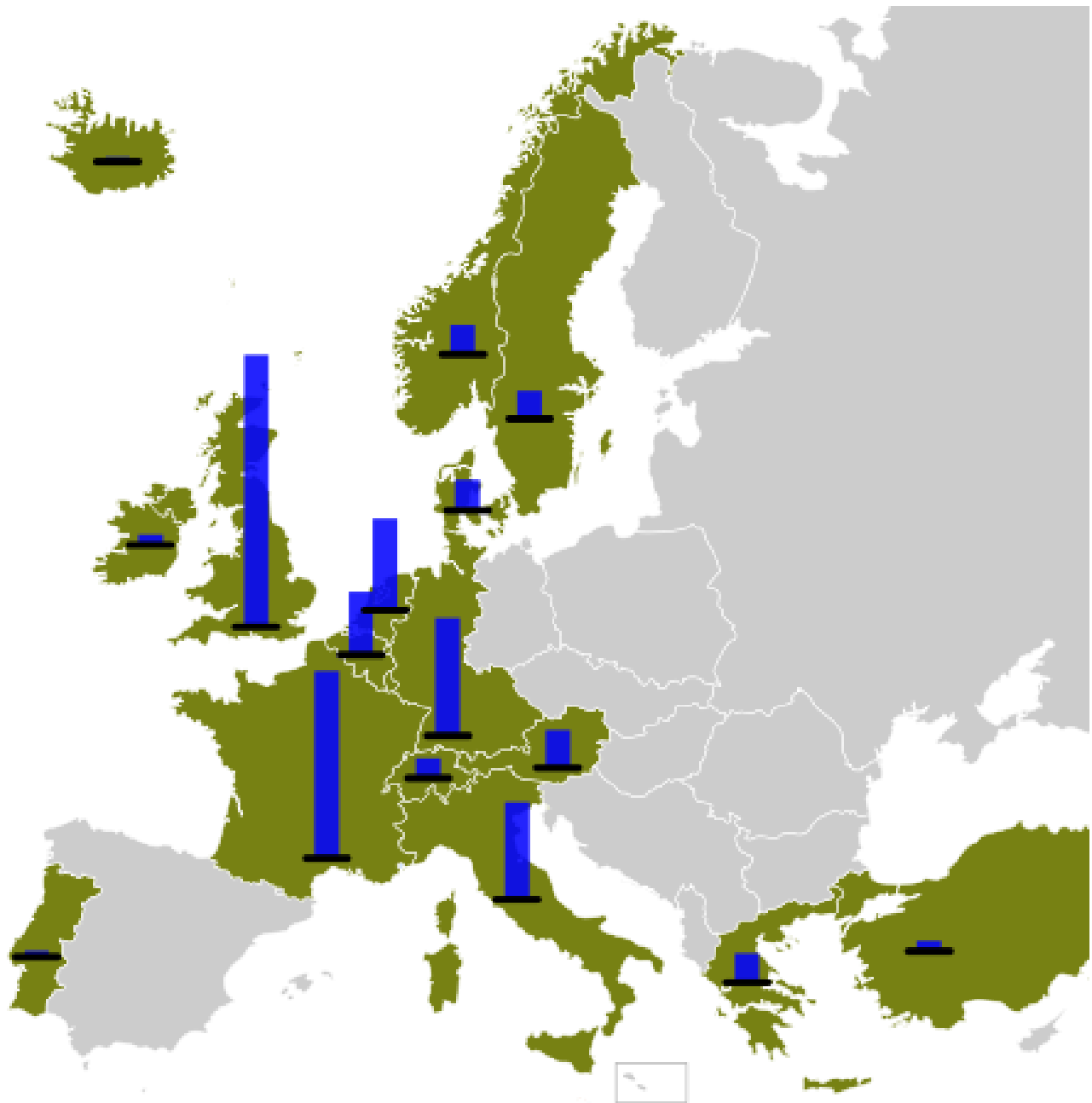
A program that provided billions of dollars of American aid to rebuild European countries after World War II and prevent them from turning to communism.

Truman and Marshall’s motivations were political and economic as well as humanitarian. To encourage European unity around democratic, capitalist principles, the Marshall Plan required governments to exclude communists from their ranks in order to receive aid. This undermined communist influence and dissuaded political moderates from forming coalition governments with them. Likewise, the funds provided by the Marshall Plan had to be spent on American goods, which boosted the U.S. economy and increased the American cultural presence in Europe.

The plan was an overwhelming success. Between its implementation in April 1948 and its termination in 1951, the Marshall Plan provided \$13 billion in economic aid to European nations. The map below shows the countries that received support through the Marshall Plan and the relative amounts of total aid that were provided to each of them.



During World War II, George C. Marshall was appointed U.S. Army chief of staff by President Roosevelt. As secretary of state under Truman, he helped create the European Recovery Program to aid struggling European economies after the war.



The countries in green are the nations that received aid through the Marshall Plan. The blue columns indicate the relative amount of total aid that each nation received. Note that Great Britain received the most aid, followed by France, West Germany, and Italy.

The Marshall Plan also perpetuated the division of capitalism and communism along Churchill’s “iron curtain.” The U.S.S.R. was offered an opportunity to participate in the program, but **Joseph Stalin** refused because of the plan’s requirements. He also forbade Poland, Romania, and the other Eastern European countries under Soviet influence from accepting Marshall Plan aid, fearing that it would undermine that influence.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Joseph Stalin

Leader of the Soviet Union from 1929 to 1953; member of the Allied Powers’ “Big Three” leaders.

4. The Berlin Airlift

Shortly after the enactment of the Marshall Plan, Stalin refused to negotiate with the United States and the Western European nations and tightened his grip on Germany.

Stalin's moves were his response to the lack of consensus among the former Allied Powers regarding the future of Germany and its capital, Berlin.



After World War II, leaders of the Allied powers divided Germany and the city of Berlin into zones of occupation.

In December 1946, the United States, Great Britain, and France combined their occupation zones in western

Germany into a single, independent state—West Germany. The Soviet Union opposed the creation of West Germany, which was organized under a democratic, pro-capitalist government. It feared the emergence of a unified, capitalist West Berlin in the Soviet zone of occupation in East Germany.

A year and a half later (in June 1948), the United States, Great Britain, and France introduced a new currency in West Germany, the Deutsche mark. In response, Stalin ordered a blockade to prevent road and rail traffic from entering the western zones of Berlin. He wanted to test the U.S. policy of containment by starving West Berlin into submission and establishing Soviet control of the German capital.

To overcome the Soviet blockade, the United States, Great Britain, and France began an 11-month operation known as the **Berlin Airlift** to provide vital supplies to West Berlin by air.



(a)



(b)

American C-47 transport planes (a) are loaded with supplies at a French airport before taking off for Berlin.

Residents of Berlin wait for a U.S. plane (b) carrying needed supplies to land at Tempelhof Airport in the American sector of the city.



TERM TO KNOW

Berlin Airlift

Operation in which western planes provided food and other necessary supplies to citizens of West Berlin during a Soviet blockade.

Planes delivered vital food, fuel, and other supplies to the western sectors of Berlin. These goods provided for the needs of over 2 million Berliners. The Soviet Union decided that it would not escalate tensions and did not challenge the operation. The United States earned the gratitude of West Berlin residents.



DID YOU KNOW

During the height of the Berlin Airlift, planes loaded with supplies landed in the western zones of the city every 45 seconds. Overall, western planes delivered over 2 million tons of supplies to the city during the airlift.

Stalin implemented the blockade to convince the United States, France, and Great Britain to stop supporting West Berlin and West Germany. By the time he ended the blockade in May 1949, Western support for both locations could not have been stronger.

5. A Divided Europe

By the end of the Berlin Airlift, the “iron curtain” Winston Churchill referred to in 1946 had become an undisputed reality.

Germany was divided between East and West. On May 23, 1949—days after Stalin lifted the blockade of Berlin—the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), or West Germany, was established. In October 1949, the Soviet Union responded by creating the German Democratic Republic (GDR) or East Germany.

Europe was also divided into eastern and western regions, as the United States and the U.S.S.R. organized defense alliances. In April 1949, the United States, Canada, Great Britain, France, and eight other European nations created the **North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)**. Member nations pledged to defend each other against Soviet aggression (and attacks from any other source). This was the first peacetime alliance entered into by the United States since its founding in 1776.



TERM TO KNOW

North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

An alliance of countries in North America and Europe that pledged to defend each other from Soviet aggression.

In 1955, the Soviet Union organized a similar alliance with Eastern European nations: the **Warsaw Pact**.



TERM TO KNOW

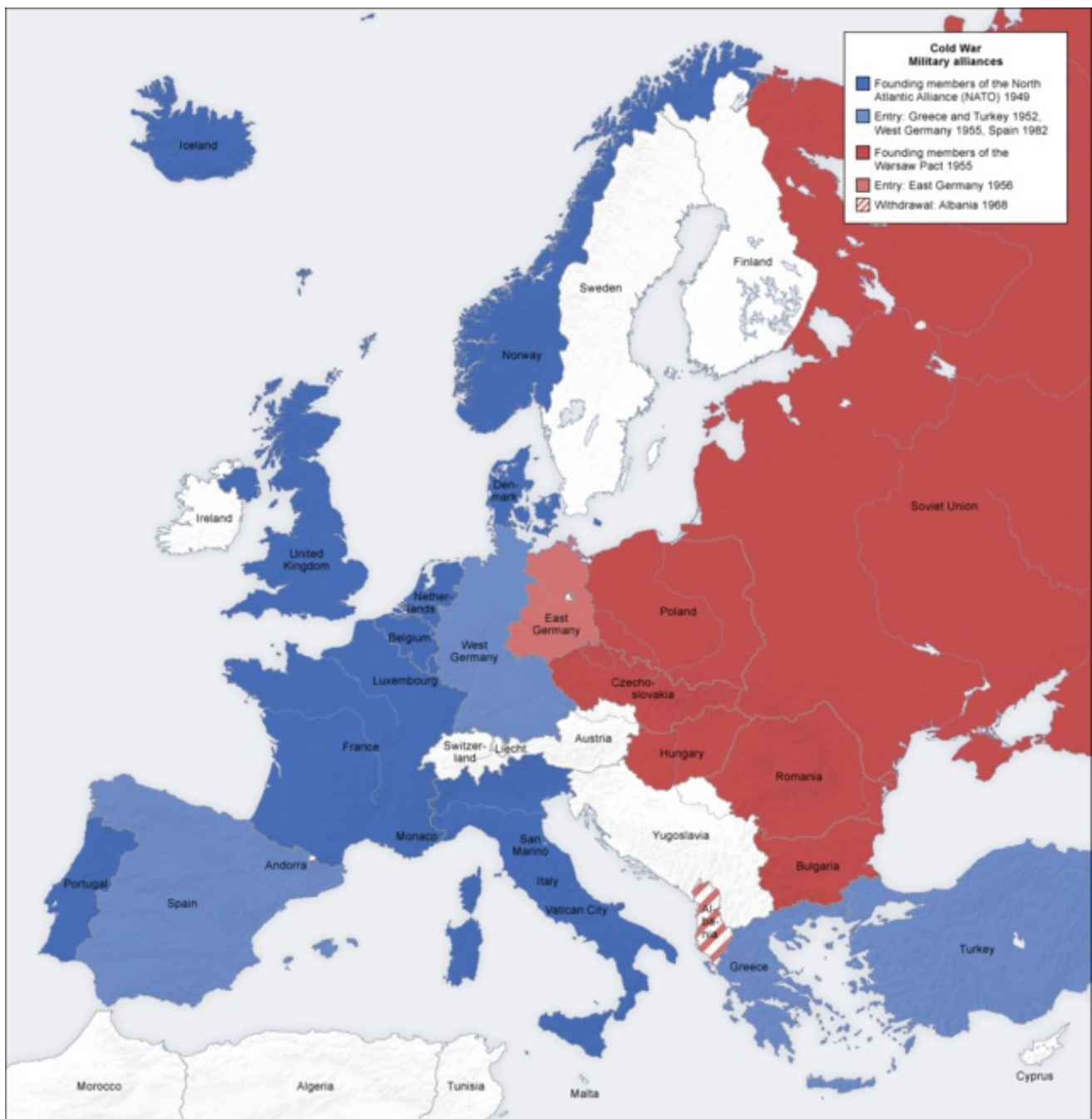
Warsaw Pact

An alliance between the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries.



MAKE THE CONNECTION

The Warsaw Pact disbanded in 1991, as communist governments in Eastern Europe—and the Soviet Union—collapsed. NATO continues to have a significant influence on world affairs. It currently has 28 member nations, including some countries formerly under Soviet influence (e.g., Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania).



A map of Cold War alliances in Europe during the mid-1950s. NATO member nations are shown in blue. Member nations of the Warsaw Pact are displayed in red.

A divided Europe was not what Allied leaders desired in the aftermath of World War II. However, in less than a decade, ideological, political, and economic rivalries between the United States and the Soviet Union made Winston Churchill’s “iron curtain” a reality.

Unlike the end of World War I, when it sought to withdraw from European affairs, the United States was committed to maintaining an international presence to contain communist expansion. Implementation of the containment policy resulted in the creation of NATO and other initiatives designed to counter Soviet influence. In a short time, the U.S. commitment to active participation in world affairs would be tested on the battlefield.



SUMMARY

During the mid-1950s, the strategy of containment became a centerpiece of American foreign policy. By declaring American support for free people under threat of subversion everywhere, the Truman Doctrine provided an ideological basis for containment. The Marshall Plan, which stimulated remarkable economic recovery in Western Europe, was the economic counterpart of containment. Other foreign policy initiatives, including aid to Turkey and Greece, the Berlin Airlift, and NATO, revealed that the United States was willing to lead efforts to contain communism. As the “iron curtain” divided Europe, the United States expanded its international influence.

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REFERENCES

Winston Churchill, Sinews of Peace (Iron Curtain) Speech, March 5, 1946, National Churchill Museum, bit.ly/2qlv3eN



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TERMS TO KNOW

Berlin Airlift

Operation in which western planes provided food and other necessary supplies to citizens of West Berlin during a Soviet blockade.

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Marshall Plan

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