

Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

Transport is the crucial issue

The German food relief effort for the Soviet Union is faced with severe transportation bottlenecks.

On Dec. 5, Germany and the Soviet Union resolved to implement emergency measures to guarantee the transfer of 250,000 tons of durable foodstuffs from the so-called "Berlin crisis reserve" to the Soviet Union.

The transfer began with an airlift the day after 200 tons of powdered milk arrived on four Soviet IL-76 transport planes from Berlin to Moscow, run by the Soviet Army. Altogether, 12,000 tons of powdered milk will be flown to Moscow in the next weeks in 250 flights.

But what is unclear is how the other 238,000 tons of food will reach the Soviets. A relic of the Cold War period and the partition of postwar Europe, only a few transit routes from the West to the East have been kept by Moscow, and these have never been modernized. This poses a giant obstacle to the food relief operation.

The few trucking routes are already overloaded. At the two key transit stations at Frankfurt/Oder on the German-Polish border, and Brest-Litovsk on the Soviet-Polish border, the queues are so long that trucks have to wait 12-18 hours to pass customs. For some private initiative convoys of 6-8 trucks each, customs procedures have recently been dropped so that they could pass without a halt.

But this was an exceptional measure that won't work with the 5,000 truck convoys required to bring 238,000 tons of food to the U.S.S.R. without creating a burden on all other transport activity.

Freight trains, which carry the equivalent of 30 truck convoys, won't work. The presently used central transit route from Berlin through Poznan

and Warsaw to Brest-Litovsk, is over-utilized—also because of the procedures for the shifting of rail gages from the European to the Russian standard.

For now, the central rail route cannot be employed. The German Transfracht agency which specializes in container transport, provided an entire train for the food transfer operation which will carry, from mid-December on, 1,200-1,500 tons of freight with each transport. But the Soviets say that the density of rail traffic at Brest-Litovsk wouldn't allow more than one or two additional trains to pass through every day.

If the Soviets, i.e., the KGB border troops who control the transit points, are telling the truth, this means two trains would have to commute 100 times each between Berlin and Moscow, to bring 238,000 tons of food to the Soviets. It takes a day to load the train in Berlin, two to three days to reach Moscow, a day of unloading there, and another two or three days to return to Berlin. Taking into account maintenance and repair, this means a year's work for each train.

There is the option of the northern Polish rail route which runs through less-populated regions and has a less-burdened infrastructure grid. The food relief train could run from Berlin to Poznan, then on to Torun and Bialystok, pass the Soviet border after the necessary gage-shifting and reach Grodno, either branching out then to the Lithuanian capital, Vilnius, or to Minsk, the capital of the Belorussian Republic, from which a rail route runs through Smolensk to Moscow.

Using this northern Polish route would create an option for employing more trains per day than on the Brest-Litovsk route. But the Soviets have so far opposed it because it would require investments into gage-shifting equipment.

This leaves the sea routes. In the Dec. 5 German-Soviet talks, Moscow offered to use the rail ferry between the military port of Klaipeda (Memel), Lithuania, and Mukran on the island of Ruegen, Germany. The Soviet Army wants to use 200 rail cars—the equivalent of three to four trains—which could bring 4,000 tons of food to the Soviet Union on each trip. The advantage of this option is that Soviet trains can be used without the need to shift gages.

The main transport by sea runs through the port of Leningrad. Once a week, a freight ship goes to the German port of Hamburg to pick up between 800 and 4,000 tons of food. On the condition that unloading operations in Leningrad are improved, the volume of sea transport can be increased.

The experts are optimistic that this winter's food relief operation will work. The problems encountered now are minor compared to bigger problems to come—for example, the withdrawal, beginning next spring, of 360,000 Soviet soldiers and their equipment, presently stationed in eastern Germany, to the Soviet Union over the next three to four years. This will require 11,000 trains and 3,000 convoys of 200 trucks each, absorbing a large part of the Polish transport infrastructure.

The envisaged increase of East-West trade in the next few years hasn't been taken into account. The governments of Germany, Poland, and the Soviet Union must discuss the construction of one or two new rail routes on a crash-program basis.