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978-0-521-86496-1 - Black Market, Cold War: Everyday Life in Berlin, 1946-1949

Paul Steege

Excerpt

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Introduction

“*An Imaginary Wall*”

On July 19, 1948, millions of Americans opened up their copy of *Life* magazine to find an article about the blockaded city of Berlin. To help explain the Soviet blockade to its readers, the magazine included a two-page map of the city with the respective occupation sectors and important local landmarks clearly marked (Figure 2). A three-dimensional barrier traced the external boundary of the three western sectors. Its significance was made explicit in the caption: “Blockade of Berlin is shown symbolically in this map, with American, British and French sectors enclosed within *an imaginary wall*.”¹ Thirteen years later, the Berlin Wall would cease to be imaginary, the East German regime rendering *Life*’s explanatory shorthand in concrete with its “antifascist protective barrier” literally cutting off West Berlin from the surrounding countryside. The magazine’s illustration bears a striking resemblance to maps of Berlin that graced posters and t-shirts in the 1980s, souvenir Cold War icons in which the Berlin Wall separated sectors filled with the national flags of the respective occupying powers. Although we could perhaps grant the editors at *Life* a kind of eerie foresight about the city’s future, the image they used to explain the blockade inaccurately depicted what was happening in and around Berlin that summer. The article described the “Soviet siege of Berlin” as “tight – dangerously tight,” overlooking not even “the smallest detail.”² This version of the blockade is wrong. Throughout 1948 and 1949, Soviet

¹ Emmet Hughes, “Berlin under Siege,” *Life* (July 19, 1948), 72–3. My emphasis.

² *Ibid.*, 26.

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FIGURE 2. Illustration from *Life* magazine, July 19, 1948. The original caption reduces its explanation of a permeable blockade to a “wall” that will not actually exist for another thirteen years: “Blockade of Berlin is shown symbolically in this map, with American, British and French sectors enclosed within an imaginary wall. Concentration of police and power facilities in the Soviet sector

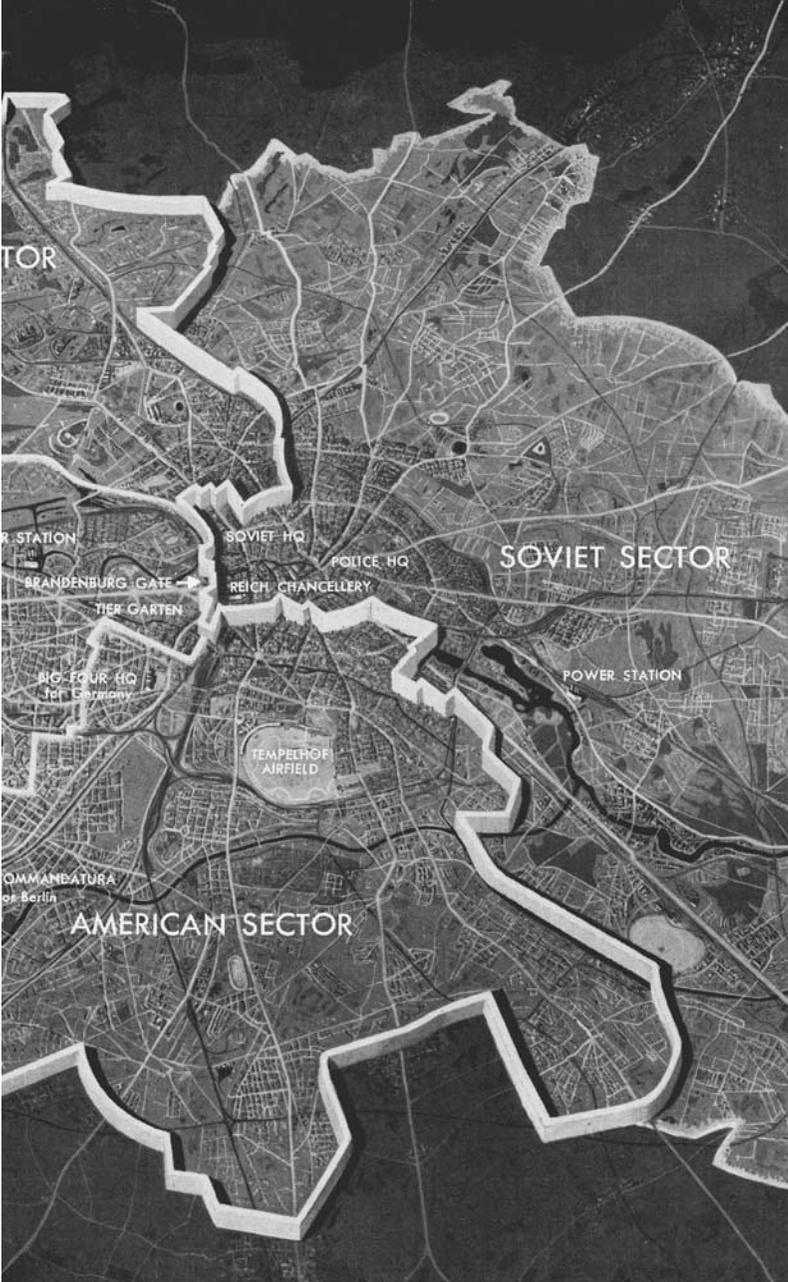
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(center and right) gives the Russians a tight grip inside the city, and they have closed the Autobahn and railroads (lower left) which reach Berlin from west through the Russian zone. American air lift comes in at Tempelhof near downtown area, while British are landing supplies at Gatow and on the Havel (left).”

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controls never amounted to an airtight barrier around the city's western sectors. While the image of a wall may have heightened the crisis's dramatic power, the Berlin Wall cannot be retroactively constructed in the Berlin of the blockade.

Five decades later, German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and U.S. President Bill Clinton joined thousands of Berliners at Berlin's Tempelhof Airport to celebrate the golden anniversary of the Berlin airlift and the great Western victory it purportedly marked. Standing in front of a representative vintage C-54 as well as a new transport plane dubbed the *Spirit of Berlin*, the speakers testified to the airlift's technical achievement. The heroic drone of its achievements overwhelmed all other aspects of the crisis. Held literally in the shadow of military transport planes, this celebration allowed no room for Berliners other than as passive German victims of Communist aggression or heroic belt-tighteners who refused to knuckle under to Soviet pressure. The gathered crowd heard only one account of Berliners' blockade experiences when a woman described her childhood memories of waiting at the end of the runway to catch chocolate bars dropped by parachute from landing aircraft.³ In this version of the blockade and airlift, the Berliners – both East and West – who continued to work, trade on the black market, and crowd onto trains into the countryside to barter or steal from farmers' fields vanished, their everyday work of survival reduced to passively waiting for assistance literally to drop from the sky.

But if we turn our gaze back to earth, we see a very different picture: a messy Berlin setting that neither superpower ever truly mastered. By focusing on everyday Berliners as they moved through the city's ruined streets and squares, this book relocates the narrative landmarks that generally demarcate Berlin's emergence as a Cold War flashpoint. It looks to the black market instead of the airlift; the rain-drenched streets of Berlin rather than the Allied Control Council (ACC); and striking Berlin rail-rovers instead of the Council of Foreign Ministers (CFM). Offering a history from the inside out, this book explores the relationship between

³ See Dan Balz, "Clinton, in Berlin, Joins Kohl to Hail '48 Airlift," *International Herald Tribune* (May 15, 1998). More generally on the anniversary celebrations, see "Beginn der Feiern zum Luftbrückenjubiläum: 12. Mai 1949: Ende der Blockade," *Der Tagesspiegel* (May 12, 1998), 15. For a description of the exploits of the renowned "candy bomber," Gail Halverson, see Ann and John Tusa, *The Berlin Airlift* (New York: Atheneum, 1988), 268–9. There is even an English-language children's book that celebrates the story of the woman who stood in for Berlin at the Tempelhof ceremony: Margot Theis Raven, *Mercedes and the Chocolate Pilot: The True Story of the Berlin Airlift and the Candy that Dropped from the Sky* (Chelsea, MI: Sleeping Bear Press, 2002).

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Berliners' day-to-day struggles to survive in the midst of wartime devastation and their part in shaping Berlin as the symbolic capital of the Cold War.⁴ While Cold War Berlin may be a familiar location for a well-worn narrative of superpower conflict, this book challenges the assumption that we have always known what that conflict was about and how it worked. The Cold War was not just imposed from above, and this book seeks to negotiate the gaps between the emergence of this crisis "on the ground" in Berlin and its political, symbolic, and historical construction that has resonated far beyond the city.

Telling Berlin Stories, 1946–1949

Rather than trying to fill in those gaps, this study highlights the fragmented nature of Berliners' postwar history. It takes up their stories in 1946 (as opposed to 1945), not out of some contrarian impulse to be different, but because one year after the German surrender, Berliners' day-to-day survival practices were becoming increasingly well-rehearsed, in effect normalizing the "temporary" status of the *postwar*.⁵ In October 1946, when the Soviet-supported Socialist Unity Party's (SED) stunning defeat in Berlin's first postwar election occurred, it marked a powerful popular rejection of the Soviet occupier's presumed dominance in the city. But it also made clear that Berliners possessed the ability to assert their power in a potent way – essentially rolling back the Soviets' domination of the city administration. Even at the height of the blockade two years later, Berliners continued to demonstrate their ability and willingness to undermine the exercise of Soviet power in and around the city, not just in their electoral decisions, but even more so in their daily choices about how and where to buy food, run their businesses, and move about the city.

The decision to begin in 1946 serves also to emphasize the Cold War not just as an imposition of international policy but as a product of the tension between high politics and Berliners' material battle to survive. At the very moment of their greatest material desperation, postwar Berliners showed themselves capable of shaping the structures of power within the city, and the election of October 1946 offers the unanticipated moment at which Berliners' dramatic agency bursts to the surface. Three years later,

⁴ My use of this term evolved out of conversations with Michael Geyer when this project was still in the dissertation stage. David Clay Large also writes about Berlin's symbolic role as the "capital of the Cold War." David Clay Large, *Berlin* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), xviii.

⁵ Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (New York: Penguin, 2005).

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when the first open battle of the Cold War seemed to have appropriated the city for a global conflict, the realities of life in a politically divided city undermined the Great Powers' claims to definitive victory or defeat – the Western victors wrestled with the economic and strategic burdens of a West Berlin that they could never abandon; the eastern losers found themselves in charge of a new state that, for all of their rhetorical posturing, the Western powers would never really challenge.

Before the founding of East and West German states in 1949, neither German municipal authorities nor occupation forces successfully met Berliners' basic material needs, a fundamental weakness that remained even as both sides made increasingly assertive claims to a Berlin they defined as an ideological battleground. This slippage played out in unintended consequences that complicated even those outcomes presumed to be most explicitly products of high politics. For the Western powers, the experiences of the blockade and airlift helped transform former enemies into allies and friends but also bound them inextricably to a city that would threaten to ensnare them in an explosion of conflict at least until the building of the Wall in 1961.⁶ For the Soviets and the SED, the public relations disaster of defeat concealed the fact that they had achieved what they sought, a Stalinist state in Germany and Western acceptance of a divided Berlin.

While images from Berlin often sum up the triumph and tragedy of the Cold War, a fresh look at Berlin from 1946 to 1949 challenges any reduction of events in Berlin to undiluted highs or lows and unambiguous victories and defeats. Still, these grand “events” continue to define Berlin's Cold War history, and even the most innovative new approaches to Cold War history run the risk of serving primarily to fill in the spaces between the heights of the Cold War's defining events to which these additions serve as subordinate, if at times nonetheless contested, objects.⁷ This book endeavors to do something more. By relocating Berlin's Cold War stories, it argues that these moments “betwixt and between” are actually key to unraveling the convoluted workings of a struggle that remains most

⁶ Andreas Daum argues that the airlift transformed the city, making “Germany's Berlin” into “America's Berlin.” Andreas W. Daum, *Kemedy in Berlin: Politik, Kultur und Emotionen im Kalten Krieg* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2003), 8 and 39.

⁷ While the discussion of filling in historiographical gaps has focused primarily on the possibilities offered by newly available archives, I would argue that a similar sensibility informs the methodological innovations of the “new Cold War history.” See the description of the University of North Carolina Press book series of the same name (under the general editorship of John Lewis Gaddis) at <http://uncpress.unc.edu/bm-series.html#new> (accessed March 16, 2006).

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often elaborated in Manichean terms.⁸ In the process of unraveling the workings of this first clash of the Cold War, I hope also to clarify some of the reasons that this epic event continues to resonate so powerfully in the world today and to suggest that the Cold War's end has not made a renewed examination of its origins less relevant.

Locating Berlin in the Cold War

The image of an isolated and inaccessible city has dominated accounts of the Berlin Blockade for nearly six decades. According to this confident narrative, the Soviets blockaded Berlin's western sectors for nearly eleven months in 1948 and 1949 in an effort to force the Western Allies to halt their separate currency reform and the formation of a West German state. Supplied by the heroic accomplishments of a Western airlift, West Berliners held out on tight rations until the Soviets backed down, conceding defeat in the first great clash of the Cold War.⁹ The agreement negotiated by Phillip Jessup and Jakov Malik to end the blockade in

⁸ The idea of "betwixt and between-ness" emerges in Victor Turner's discussion of the liminality that characterizes the experience of initiates during rites of passage among the Ndembu people of south-central Africa. For a general discussion of this liminal condition, see Victor Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*," in *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1973), 93–110. I discuss more fully the liminal nature of Berlin in the early Cold War in "Finding the there, there: local space, global ritual, and early Cold War Berlin," in *Earth Ways: Framing Geographical Meanings*, Gary Backhaus and John Murungi, eds. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004), 155–72.

⁹ W. Philips Davison, *The Berlin Blockade: A Study in Cold War Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958), 19–20. Despite its strident Cold War tone, the book located the events of the evolving crisis in Berlin in a framework that most subsequent work has retained without much question. See, e.g., Tusa, *The Berlin Airlift*, 102–5. Michael Haydock, *City under Siege: The Berlin Blockade and Airlift, 1948–1949* (Washington and London: Brassey's, 1999), 123–5. Thomas Parrish, *Berlin in the Balance: The Blockade, the Airlift, the First Major Battle of the Cold War* (Reading, MA: Perseus Books, 1998), 141–2. The former East German historian Gerhard Keiderling is generally more forgiving of Soviet and East German intentions but does not dramatically shift the center of gravity of the events under analysis; see his "Rosinenbomber über Berlin": *Währungsreform, Blockade, Luftbrücke, Teilung* (Berlin: Dietz, 1998), 18–28. See also the timeline in Hermann Weber, *DDR Grundriß der Geschichte 1945–1990* (Hannover: Fackelträger Verlag, 1991), 287. The first account to challenge this vision of the blockade was Andreas Hallen and Thomas Lindenberger, "Frontstadt mit Lücken: Ein Versuch über die Halbwahrheiten von Blockade und Luftbrücke," *Berliner Geschichtswerkstatt*, ed., *Der Wedding – hart an der Grenze: Weiterleben in Berlin nach dem Krieg* (Berlin: Nishen Verlag, 1987). These ideas were developed most fully in William Stivers, "The Incomplete Blockade: Soviet Zone Supply of West Berlin, 1948–49," *Diplomatic History* 21, no. 4. (Fall 1997), 569–602. In a similar vein, see also Volker Koop, *Kein Kampf um Berlin? Deutsche Politik zur Zeit der Berlin-Blockade 1948/1949* (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag, 1998).

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May 1949 seemed to draw a neat line under which historians could add up their tidy explanatory sums.¹⁰ It marked the end to a clash – somewhat short of “hot” war – in which Soviet policy thrust (blockade) encountered Western policy parry (airlift), with Berlin simply the arena where the duel took place.

Throughout its postwar history and especially since the building of the Wall in 1961, Berlin served as *the* icon of Cold War conflict, a site for presidential pilgrimages and spy exchanges.¹¹ Even after the Cold War’s end, chunks of the Berlin Wall (or at least multicolored pieces of concrete alleged to come from the Wall) remain one of the most obvious Cold War souvenirs, an artifact of the conflict that presumably defined the city. The West Berlin government’s official chronicle of 1946–8 already locates the city’s immediate postwar history in the shadow of the growing east-west divide, and most historians of postwar Germany and particularly of postwar Berlin have viewed this period through the lens of the emerging Cold War.¹² From this perspective, events on the ground in Berlin manifested the potent forces driving inevitably toward a total collapse of the postwar occupation regime and the construction of two stable, separate German states that were both “intrinsic products of the Cold War” and “symbols of the broader global conflict.”¹³ Berlin functioned as the point at which two competing trajectories of power – each to end in a new German state – most directly confronted each other and produced their most explosive conflicts.

¹⁰ The Jessup-Malik agreement was reached by representatives of the four occupation powers on May 4, 1949 and called for the lifting eight days later of all restrictions imposed on transportation and communication between Berlin and the western zones since March 1948 as well as between the western zones and the Soviet Zone. On the Jessup-Malik agreement, see Avi Shlaim, *The United States and the Berlin Blockade* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1983) and Phillip C. Jessup, “Park Avenue Diplomacy – Ending the Berlin Blockade,” *Political Science Quarterly* 87, no. 3 (September 1972), 377–400.

¹¹ John F. Kennedy’s speech before the Schöneberg town hall in which he pronounced that “ich bin ein Berliner” and Ronald Reagan’s call for Mikhail Gorbachev to “tear down this wall” are but two of the most famous. Likewise, the exchange for U-2 pilot Francis Gary Powers on the Glienicke Bridge is simply one among many. For Cold War film and fiction, Berlin has, as well, played a prominent role. Perhaps most famous is John LeCarré’s classic cold war tale, *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1964). On the general image of Berlin in the Cold War, see Eric Morris, *Blockade: Berlin and the Cold War* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1973), 243.

¹² Berlin (West Berlin) Landesarchiv, ed., *Berlin: Behauptung von Freiheit und Selbstverwaltung 1946–1948* (Berlin: Heinz Pitzing Verlag, 1959), 434.

¹³ Corey Ross, *The East German Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of the GDR* (London: Arnold, 2002), 2.

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The Cold War laid the foundation for two separate postwar histories of East and West Germany: the narrative of western integration and the West German economic miracle contrasted with the ambiguous development of existing socialism in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). These historical trajectories interacted only on the basis of the competition defined and demanded by the Cold War, and the two states' nascent development over the course of these years depended on this clash.¹⁴ British and American officials aggressively facilitated the formation of a separate West German state, and Soviet officials ultimately preferred a subservient partial state to a unified and potentially independent-minded German whole.¹⁵ But trying to establish blame for the division of Germany into two states should not anchor examinations of Germany in the second half of the twentieth century. Instead, a history of postwar Germany must highlight the myriad continuities and ruptures that transcend easy geographical, political, and temporal divides and fit them into a multilayered historical stream that did not end with the start of the Cold War.¹⁶

In the introduction to the second volume of his history of the Korean War, Bruce Cumings notes that the outbreak of war in 1950 was a “*denouement* mistaken for a beginning.”¹⁷ The Berlin Blockade represents a similar confusion of historical trajectory. As soon as historians pronounce it a Cold War battle, they mark it as radically distinct from the German past that immediately preceded it. It becomes a post-World War II contest between East and West in *occupied* Germany and thus hardly a *German* historical event at all. If one follows this line of reasoning, the blockade took place in Berlin only by geographical accident. It was a product of the intersection of Soviet and Western policies and was essentially imposed upon the city from the outside. Berlin assumed

¹⁴ William Glenn Gray, *Germany's Cold War: The Global Campaign to Isolate East Germany, 1949-1969* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2003) and Ronald J. Granieri, *The Ambivalent Alliance: Konrad Adenauer, the CDU/CSU, and the West, 1949-1966*, Monographs in German History 9 (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2003).

¹⁵ For an account that views German division as a product of British and American policy, see Carolyn Woods Eisenberg, *Drawing the Line: The American Decision to Divide Germany, 1944-1949* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

¹⁶ See Christoph Kleßmann's introduction to *The Divided Past: Rewriting Post-War German History*, Christoph Kleßmann, ed. (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2001), 1-9 and Konrad H. Jarausch and Michael Geyer, *Shattered Past: Reconstructing German Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 16-33; also, Catherine Epstein, *The Last Revolutionaries* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

¹⁷ Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War*, vol. 2, *The Roaring of the Cataract 1947-1950* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 9. Italics in original.

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importance in this evolving clash only as one piece in the larger conflict seen to have emerged in Europe by early 1948. American Military Governor Lucius Clay explained Berlin's significance in an oft-cited message from April 1948:

We have lost Czechoslovakia. Norway is threatened. We retreat from Berlin. When Berlin falls, Western Germany will be next. If we mean . . . to hold Europe against Communism, we must not budge. We can take humiliation and pressure short of war in Berlin without losing face. If we withdraw, our position in Europe is threatened. If America does not understand this now, does not know that the issue is cast, then it never will and communism will run rampant. I believe the future of democracy requires us to stay.¹⁸

Thus, in Clay's polemical declaration, Berlin posed a dilemma that primarily questioned American willingness to recognize the city's overall strategic implications. For Clay's pitch to Washington politicians, this challenge had little to do with the specific struggles in the city. Rather, it lay in the symbolic value of Berlin for a larger strategic concern that had been coming into focus since 1947. In this context, only after the traditional "declarations" of Cold War – the Truman Doctrine and Marshall Plan, the creation of the Cominform, and the gradual consolidation of Soviet power in Eastern Europe – could Berlin matter for the Cold War.¹⁹ Regardless of whether one explains this escalation of international tension as the product of Soviet aggression, American imperialism, or some other causal variation, the blockade was part of a larger teleology of Cold War. In the evolving international calculus for which Berlin functioned as both arena and prize, Berliners' everyday life remained the direct object of the high political predicate.

But neither Germany nor Berlin comprised a vacuum into which the two nascent superpowers were inextricably drawn and within which their inevitable hegemonic clash came to pass.²⁰ Following the destruction of the Nazi Third Reich, Germany was not an empty space, in either material or political terms. Certainly, the victorious allies – East and West – sought

¹⁸ Lucius D. Clay, *Decision in Germany*, reprint (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1970), 361.

¹⁹ "Text of President Truman's Speech on New Foreign Policy," *New York Times* (March 13, 1947), 2. See Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War*, 35. See also Charles E. Bohlen, *Witness to History 1929–1969* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1973), 260; and Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War 1945–1996*, 9th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002), esp. chapter 2.

²⁰ See John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 4. See also Anders Stephanson, "The United States," in *The Origins of the Cold War in Europe*, David Reynolds, ed., 28.