

## Famous 1948 Airlift hangs over Berlin vote on Tempelhof

Tempelhof Airport is a powerful symbol to Berliners, even though its economic significance has declined virtually to nil. Hitler's showpiece airport is still a place of architectural superlatives.

But the firm place it occupies in the hearts of many older citizens has more to do with its role in saving West Berlin from slow strangulation by Soviet forces soon after the Nazi dictator's demise.

On Sunday, hundreds of thousands of Berliners are to vote in a referendum on whether Tempelhof should be kept open in defiance of repeated political decisions and court rulings that it must close.

Both sides are campaigning furiously. The issue has degenerated into point-scoring between the left-wing government led by Social Democrat (SPD) Mayor Klaus Wowereit, who wants to shut the airport, and Christian Democrat (CDU) leader Friedbert Pflueger, who aims to keep it open.

The great arc of the complex - designed to represent the outspread wings of the German eagle - was once the largest building in the world, and is now said to be the third-largest.

John F. Kennedy landed here in June 1963 before making his 'Ich bin ein Berliner' speech. Other US presidents to use the airport include Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton.

But its runways are too short for most commercial purposes, and Berliners in the suburbs that now surround the airport are no longer prepared to put up with the noise.

By the mid-1970s, Tegel Airport to the north had become West Berlin's main airport, and after the Wall came down in 1989, Schoenefeld, built outside the city limits by the former communist government, was ready to take over.

Now Berlin is building a major new airport on the Schoenefeld site, but its approval was contingent on shutting down both Tegel and Tempelhof - as Wowereit has repeatedly made clear.

Nevertheless, the uncharismatic Pflueger with his CDU lagging well behind the mayor's leftist coalition in the polls believes he is onto a vote-winner. Pflueger has found a backer in the form of US millionaire Ronald S. Lauder, who plans to turn the airport and its buildings into a lucrative health centre for high-spending foreigners flying in for top-class German medical treatment.

Wowereit, by contrast, has been vague about what to do with the vast open space after it is closed in October.

Chancellor Angela Merkel has come to the aid of party ally Pflueger and called for Tempelhof to be saved. 'The airport and the airlift is a symbol of the history of this city,' she said, alluding to the famous postwar operation to keep West Berlin out of the hands of the communists.

After the Soviets closed the land approaches to West Berlin in June 1948, US and British aircraft began landing in rapid succession at Tempelhof, bringing in 2.3 million tonnes of food and other supplies. The 15-month operation saw two million trapped West Berliners through a hard winter and clearly demonstrated US political commitment at the start of the Cold War.

At its height, 'Operation Vittles' saw planes landing virtually every 30 seconds - 277,000 flights in all - in a logistical success that startled the Soviets and took even the Allies by surprise.

West Berliners dubbed the planes, mostly US C54 Skymasters, 'Rosinenbomber' - Raisin Bombers - and began to see the Allies as friends and protectors, rather than occupiers.

Those memories, rather commercial considerations, lie at the root of the wish to keep it open.

But Wowerit is adamant that the airport, which still operates a few mainly turboprop flights to other German cities has to close on Oct 31. He has pledged to ignore the outcome of Sunday's non-binding vote, if - as expected - it goes against him.

*Rohan Minogue ( © IANS / India eNews)*