Kennedy in Berlin

Kennedy in Berlin examines one of the most spectacular political events of the twentieth century. This book tells the story of the enthusiastically celebrated visit that U.S. president John F. Kennedy paid to Berlin, the “frontline city of the Cold War,” in June 1963. The president’s tour triggered the greatest political happening in German history and resonated around the world, not least on account of Kennedy’s famous declaration – “Ich bin ein Berliner.” Andreas W. Daum sets Kennedy’s visit against the background of the special relationship that had developed between the United States and West Berlin in the wake of World War II. “America’s Berlin” became the place for staging politics as theatrical performance. Political performances helped create a sense of transatlantic community and emotional closeness between the United States and Germany that has now itself become history. Kennedy in Berlin is an innovative contribution to the study of transatlantic relations, the Cold War, and the conduct of diplomacy in the age of mass media. Using a broad range of sources, this book sheds new light on the interplay between politics and culture in the modern era.

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PUBLICATIONS OF THE GERMAN HISTORICAL INSTITUTE
WASHINGTON, D.C.

Edited by Christof Mauch
with the assistance of David Lazar

The German Historical Institute is a center for advanced study and research whose purpose is to provide a permanent basis for scholarly cooperation among historians from the Federal Republic of Germany and the United States. The Institute conducts, promotes, and supports research into both American and German political, social, economic, and cultural history; into transatlantic migration, especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; and into the history of international relations, with special emphasis on the roles played by the United States and Germany.

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Kennedy in Berlin

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GERMAN HISTORICAL INSTITUTE
Washington, D.C.
and

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
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Acknowledgments

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to those institutions and individuals who, over the course of many years, have made the research for this book enjoyable and its writing possible.

I am grateful to each of the archives and libraries listed in the bibliography, particularly those in Berlin; Bonn; Washington, D.C.; and Boston and Cambridge, Massachusetts, for allowing me to study their archival material extensively. At the archives of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, I received generous help from Gertrud Lenz, Harry Scholz, and Wolfgang Sterke. During my visits to the Landesarchiv Berlin and in our transatlantic correspondence, Dr. Christiane Schuchard, Monika Bartzsch, and Barbara Schäche were repeatedly very helpful. At the archives of the Free University Berlin, Dr. Wolfgang Engel advised me cordially, as did James Leyerzapf at the Dwight D. Eisenhower Library in Abilene, Kansas; Allan Goodrich and James Hill at the John F. Kennedy Library near Boston; and Elena Danielson at the Hoover Institution Archives.

The suggestions I received from Dirk Bönker and David E. Barclay from the very start of my project enriched it greatly. Harold Hurwitz, Carl Kaysen, Tom Johnson, Gerald D. Livingston, Martha Mautner, and Fritz Stern, as well as the late Gordon A. Craig, Horst Hartwich, Melvin J. Lasky, and Karl Mautner, deserve my sincerest gratitude for their gracious willingness to talk with me and provide me with important insights from their personal recollections. I was fortunate to be able to speak with two men who participated in Kennedy’s procession through Berlin: Robert H. Lochner and Heinz Weber. I am also grateful for the valuable advice given to me by Peter Becker, Marion Deshmukh, Anselm Doering-Manteuffel, Martin H. Geyer, Robert Grathwol, Vernon Lidtke, Alf Lüdtke, Wolfgang Schivelbusch, James F. Tent, and Richard F. Wetzell. Jens Beckert, Georg Nicolaus
Knauer, Elfriede R. Knauer, Ulrich Krotz, and Wilfried Mausbach are to be thanked for their friendship and for reading parts of the manuscript. I thank the Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies at Harvard University and the German Academic Exchange Service for the John F. Kennedy Memorial Fellowship that I was awarded for the academic year 2001/2002, during which the original manuscript was written. The Center for European Studies provided me exceptionally favorable conditions for this task; special thanks go to Abby Collins, Patricia Craig, Peter Hall, and Lisa Eschenbach. The German Historical Institute in Washington, D.C., a vitally important hinge in opening the doors of transatlantic exchange in academia, gave me a thoroughly stimulating environment for more than five years prior to 2001. I am also indebted to the College of Arts and Sciences at SUNY Buffalo for its support in defraying the cost of permission fees for using copyrighted materials.

Egon Bahr, former advisor to Willy Brandt and politically active far beyond the years on which my study focuses, kindly presented the original German version of this book to the public in June 2003 at the Schöneberg City Hall, in front of which John F. Kennedy delivered his famous speech to Berliners forty years earlier. My thanks go to Michael Werner, editor-in-chief at Schöningh Verlag, who agreed to a translation, and to the German Historical Institute, Washington, D.C., for its support of this project, which David Lazar handled with much care. I thank Cambridge University Press for including my book in its program in history and Dona Geyer, who translated it. The text profited from Dona’s talent of combining accuracy with ingenuity; it was a pleasure to collaborate with her.

My sincere thanks are extended to those individuals who have supported me with their expertise and continual encouragement throughout the years of my transatlantic existence: Volker R. Berghahn, David Blackbourn, Rüdiger vom Bruch, Roger Chickering, Kathleen Conzen, Wolfgang Hardtwig, Martina Kessel, Johannes Paulmann, Gerhard A. Ritter, James J. Sheehan, and Margit Szöllösi-Janze.

Evis Daum supported me during the final writing phase and while I was working on the translation in her own uniquely generous way. Evis’s belief in the value of both writing and reading books has always been encouraging; her kind reminders that there is much to discover beyond them, and her love, more than anything else, are essential for our life together. In the meantime, our son Nicholas has begun to draw his parents’ attention to a very different genre of books, and I am happy to admit that the pictures in his are much nicer than those in mine, not to mention the absence of notes.
Acknowledgments

Once again, I wish to express my gratitude to my parents for all the support and affection they have given me throughout my life. The American edition of this book is dedicated to the memory of my father, Gerhard Daum. I have always admired his boundless curiosity and broad intellectual interests, and I continue to value the virtues he exemplified – his sincerity, his reliability, and his positive outlook on life.

August 2007
Kennedy in Berlin invites the reader to explore how politics has been staged in the twentieth century. This book wants to demonstrate how statesmen, diplomats, media, and people in the streets have contributed to dramatizing politics and how this drama has been used as a political argument for domestic and international purposes. Closely choreographed as they may be, political performances develop a dynamic of their own, as Kennedy in Berlin demonstrates, and their meaning changes over time in our collective memory. Political performances feature actors who follow predetermined roles, but they are equally constituted by those who watch the stage, articulate their reactions, and interfere in the script.

One specific moment in time stands in the center of the book, as its title indicates. On June 26, 1963, one of the most charismatic American presidents ever traveled to one of the most embattled sites of recent history, a city with highly ambiguous symbolical notions. John F. Kennedy toured Berlin – to be more precise: he toured America’s Berlin. The president visited the western part of a city that had been, in previous times, the capital of Prussia and Imperial Germany, the metropolis of Weimar Germany, and the center of Hitler’s Nazi dictatorship. But the Berlin Kennedy went to had begun to establish a special relationship with America in the late 1940s at the latest, in the early years of what contemporaries already called the Cold War. Kennedy’s stay in Berlin, at that time sharply divided between East and West, triggered the greatest happening in German history prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. In fact, it generated one of the most spectacular events of the modern era.

For sure, any moment in time is unique and, as in this prominent case, worth being appreciated. Surprisingly enough, we have been lacking so far not only a precise account of what happened on that June day along the Cold War’s most dramatic dividing line, but also an explanation of why
things occurred as they did. Any moment in time reflects the epoch at large. It is the result of multiple factors and only possible due to circumstances and developments that both precede and transcend the specific setting. A microperspective, that is, a close examination of a particular moment, may therefore allow new macroperspectives, meaning insights into the era in which the moment was embedded. Yet, as Carlo Ginzburg has rightly argued, the “reconciliation between macro- and microhistory” needs to be pursued consciously by the historian.\(^1\) Using a microhistory to reveal larger issues at stake requires one to read the specific point in time closely as well as to frame this reading in broad terms, provided by general questions and today’s knowledge, and to keep an eye on the historicity of the moment itself. *Kennedy in Berlin* undertakes such an attempt.

By looking at John F. Kennedy’s trip to Berlin, this book identifies major features of the twentieth century and especially the era of the Cold War that have so far received little attention. It highlights symbolic politics, performative action, and emotions as constitutive for transatlantic and especially German-American relations. It emphasizes the tendency to dramatize politics in order to gain legitimacy for specific policies, a technique that characterized not only, as we often read, authoritarian regimes, but also democracies and relations among democratic states. *Kennedy in Berlin* focuses on what I would like to call the politics of visibility, a concern with visual imagery that became essential for gaining consensus in the twentieth century. Last, but not least, this book wants to explain why West Germans, even more so than people in America, cheered an American president so enthusiastically that he appeared almost as a divine sign promising a bright future – certainly a phenomenon that is hard to believe for today’s generation.

My hope is to draw readers interested in American and German history, international relations, and the Cold War era, as well as, more generally, in the interactions between politics and culture. My arguments are meant to contribute specifically to the ongoing debates about the history and future of transatlantic and in particular German-American relations. We keep discussing whether the United States created a “consensual hegemony” (Charles S. Maier) or an “empire by invitation” (Geir Lundestad) in Europe following the Second World War. We continue debating to what degree the United States’ “soft power” (Joseph S. Nye), that is, its ability to attract others by the legitimacy of its policies and the values that underlie them, affected domestic and international politics during the Cold War era. We want to know more about the potential and the limits of “cooperation among democracies” (Thomas Risse). We still ask why some European societies aligned themselves so closely with a hegemonic power located
across the Atlantic. And we need to consider why they ultimately began disassociating themselves from this power and thus raised the challenge of defining a new European-American partnership as “one of equals, of real partners” (Stephen F. Szabo). As the reader will see, the chapters of this book offer a set of nuanced arguments about these and related questions.

*Kennedy in Berlin* is a piece of historical research, but it has profited immensely from dialogue with neighboring disciplines. It wants to show that source-based diplomatic history and a cultural history concerned with ideas, symbols, and emotions are mutually enriching and share common ground. I am indebted especially to works in the fields of political science and international relations inspired by Karl W. Deutsch. Clifford Geertz’s anthropology and recent historical anthropology have greatly informed my approach to the topic, especially my attempt to provide a thick description of an event in which all action bore symbolic character and deserves to be explained in its historical context. Max Weber’s sociology of community and society provided an important stimulus, as did modern art history with its emphasis on the interplay of images, media, and society. Finally, my analysis of a Cold War event would not have been possible without taking into account historical research that has dealt with very different epochs, especially works on the history of civil society and the emergence of nation states in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The city of Berlin – “the hottest spot in the world” as Scarlet, the daughter of a Coca-Cola manager, exclaimed in Billy Wilder’s legendary movie *One, Two, Three* – was, indeed, a Cold War theater in two senses: as an arena of strategic contest and as a stage on which to perform politics. This dual character of Berlin has led me to experiment with the arrangement of the story. *Kennedy in Berlin* is structured along the sequence of a theater performance. Following an introduction that highlights the main analytical interests, the first chapter describes the story of America’s Berlin, its protagonists and transformations over time. The second chapter looks at Kennedy’s actual visit to Germany and its staging in 1963. The third chapter deals with the dramatic climax of Kennedy’s trip, his tour of Berlin on June 26, 1963; it solves the many puzzles and myths surrounding Kennedy’s sentence “Ich bin ein Berliner.” The fourth chapter collects the audience’s responses after the curtain fell, including a look at a counterperformance, the visit of Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev to East Berlin only a few days after John F. Kennedy had triumphantly toured West Berlin. Finally, the epilogue describes how the show went on – from the staging of America’s Berlin as part of a heroic postwar story to the turbulence of the succeeding decades, during which American presidents received a much more mixed reception in
Preface to the English Edition

Berlin, and to the redefinition of Berlin as the capital of unified Germany after 1990.

The translation differs slightly from the German original. I have shortened the text and only occasionally added a half sentence to explain a particular detail. The notes and bibliography have been updated; many references to literature in German have been replaced by ones to more recent works written in English.
Abbreviations

AA Auswärtiges Amt
AAP Akten zur Auswärtigen Politik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland
AFES Archiv der sozialen Demokratie der Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Bonn
AFL-CIO American Federation of Labor–Congress of Industrial Organizations
ARD Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Rundfunkanstalten Deutschlands
CBS Columbia Broadcasting System
CDU Christian Democratic Union
CIA Central Intelligence Agency
CSU Christian Social Union of Bavaria
DDEL Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kansas
EEC European Economic Community
FDJ Freie Deutsche Jugend
FRUS Foreign Relations of the United States of America
FU Freie Universität Berlin/Free University Berlin
FU Archiv Universitätsarchiv der Freien Universität Berlin
GDR German Democratic Republic
GML George C. Marshall Library, Lexington, Virginia
GMMA George Meany Memorial Archives, Silver Spring, Maryland
HIA Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford, California
JFKL John F. Kennedy Library, Boston, Massachusetts
LBJL Lyndon B. Johnson Library, Austin, Texas
LAB Landesarchiv Berlin, Berlin
LoC Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Washington, D.C.
MLF Multilateral nuclear force
NA National Archives II, College Park, Maryland
NBC National Broadcasting Company
### Abbreviations

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<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tr>
<td>NSF</td>
<td>National Security Files</td>
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<td>NSF, T &amp; C</td>
<td>National Security Files, Trips &amp; Conferences</td>
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<tr>
<td>PAAA</td>
<td>Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes, Berlin</td>
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<tr>
<td>PPP</td>
<td><em>Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States</em></td>
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<td>RFK Papers</td>
<td>Robert F. Kennedy Papers, John F. Kennedy Library</td>
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<tr>
<td>RIAS</td>
<td>Rundfunk im Amerikanischen Sektor</td>
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<tr>
<td>SALT</td>
<td>Strategic Arms Limitation Talks</td>
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<td>SDI</td>
<td>Strategic Defense Initiative</td>
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<td>SFB</td>
<td>Sender Freies Berlin</td>
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<td>SPD</td>
<td>Social Democratic Party</td>
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<td>UAW</td>
<td>United Automobile Workers Union</td>
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<td>USIA</td>
<td>United States Information Agency</td>
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<td>USIS</td>
<td>United States Information Service</td>
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<td>WBA</td>
<td>Willy-Brandt-Archiv im Archiv der sozialen Demokratie der Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Bonn</td>
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