

## *Introduction*

### *America's Berlin and John F. Kennedy*

In the summer of 1963, President John F. Kennedy visited the Federal Republic of Germany for four days, from June 23 to 26. On the last day of this trip, he flew to the divided city of Berlin. The eight hours Kennedy spent in the western sector of the city became “one of the great spectacles” of the Cold War.<sup>1</sup> Hundreds of thousands of enthusiastic spectators lined the streets of the motorcade route to watch Kennedy, West German chancellor Konrad Adenauer, and Willy Brandt, then the mayor of West Berlin, drive by in an open car, covered with confetti and flowers, engulfed in cheers and jubilation, and followed by television cameras broadcasting the event to numerous countries. The pictures of this triumphal procession circled the globe, as did the president’s rousing speech before the Schöneberg City Hall, the administrative headquarters of West Berlin at the time. Kennedy’s speech culminated in a sentence that was destined to become one of the most famous statements ever made in the history of political rhetoric and one engraved forever upon the memories of people on both sides of the Atlantic: “*Ich bin ein Berliner.*”

John F. Kennedy’s trip to Berlin represents one of the most electrifying events of Cold War history and marks a highpoint in German-American relations. Never before had Germans felt so close to an American president, nor would they ever again, except during the public mourning after the president’s assassination five months later. Following Kennedy’s death, his “*Ich bin ein Berliner*” became a mythic part of collective memory in the United States and West Germany alike. Now that the Cold War is over, we have the unique chance to reevaluate Kennedy’s seminal visit to Germany and its historical importance. For the first time, this book makes use of the large pool of source material that is accessible today and thus aims to rediscover the fascination of this event.<sup>2</sup>

By reexamining Kennedy's Berlin visit in the context of the Cold War era, we are also able to take a new approach to the study of transatlantic relations in the twentieth century. As this book argues, cultural and emotional factors had a significant impact on these relations. So too did the social networks that spanned the Atlantic and certain ideas that appealed in equal measure to the historical awareness of many people in the United States and Germany. Furthermore, international Cold War politics was played out before a global audience. This was one reason why Kennedy's visit was choreographed and conducted much like a stage production: it was not only useful but also imperative that politics become visible and strike an emotional chord in everyone involved.

All of these moments helped create political and emotional links between the West German and American societies following the Second World War. I suggest that we are speaking here of a process of transnational community building, which was expressed most spectacularly by the Kennedy visit in June 1963. The experience of American support for West Berlin after 1948, the year in which the famous Berlin Airlift began, was the most important catalyst in making this process possible. West Berlin was more heavily influenced by the United States than any other part of Germany and developed a "special relationship" with America. The Soviet blockade and the Airlift opened the way for the incorporation of Berlin in the heroic reading of American history. In the eyes of many Americans, the defense of Berlin was a glowing example of the country fulfilling its mission to advance freedom worldwide. During the Cold War, West Berlin became the embodiment of America's "city on a hill" and thus helped perpetuate the old myth of American society as the promising new societal order once envisioned by seventeenth-century pilgrim settlers.<sup>3</sup>

For this reason the significance of West Berlin during the Cold War resonated through both German and American history. To call the city "America's Berlin," as I do in this book, is the most succinct way to state that the relationship between West Berlin and the United States during the Cold War intensified and became a close cultural and emotional bond.<sup>4</sup> Kennedy's "*Ich bin ein Berliner*" marked the symbolic highpoint of this bond, which began to weaken after 1963. The account of why the special relationship between Berlin and America both intensified and waned during the Cold War is an integral part of understanding the history of Kennedy's visit. The story of America's Berlin thus demonstrates that the development of West Germany after 1945 was deeply influenced by the politics and ideologies of other countries, especially the United States. Therefore, one aim of this

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book is to argue in favor of extending the scope and evaluation of both American and German history to the transnational level.<sup>5</sup>

Kennedy's trip to Berlin in June 1963 was an event unparalleled in Germany's postwar history prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Crowds of people gathered in the streets in what were then unprecedented numbers to celebrate the presence of a single politician. The media provided uninterrupted coverage. The mood in the city alternated between enthusiastic jubilation, Carnival revelry, and respectful silence. Never again in the history of the Federal Republic would the charisma of a politician mobilize such emotions and instill such devotion in the population. At the same time, Kennedy was walking a political tightrope in coming to Germany. The trip was risky with regard to alliance politics, proved controversial in the United States, and took place during a serious transatlantic crisis.<sup>6</sup>

Following the erection of the Berlin Wall in 1961, massive criticism was directed at the United States' involvement with West Berlin. The Federal Republic and other Western European countries were highly skeptical of the strategic reorientation undertaken by the Kennedy administration. Likewise, the United States exerted massive pressure on the Europeans in matters of fiscal policy. Moreover, the American government feared that the Franco-German friendship treaty of January 1963 and the nationalism of French president Charles de Gaulle would undermine both the transatlantic alliance and American hegemony in Western Europe. In addition, the Kennedy visit prompted power struggles among political forces within West Germany, namely, between Bonn and Berlin, between the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD), between the so-called Gaullists and Atlanticists, and between Konrad Adenauer and Willy Brandt.

More than the ritualized commemoration of Kennedy's famous statement "*Ich bin ein Berliner*" reveals, the visit of the American president was an event of considerable drama not only with regard to its impact on society but also in the way it influenced domestic and foreign policies. This book seeks to unravel the multiple dimensions of Kennedy's visit by choosing three main foci. First, I seek to decode, through a thick description, the various aspects of the event as a microhistory of the Cold War in order to reveal the macrohistorical conditions of the era.<sup>7</sup> The events of June 1963 help us understand the larger issues at stake in transatlantic relations during the Cold War era. This emphasis explains why this book does not simply start with the arrival of Air Force One at the Cologne-Bonn Airport on June 23, 1963, but discusses the preceding decades as well as Kennedy's assassination and the staging of

transatlantic politics that followed. My hope is to help give new meaning to a history of events that does justice to the specific moment and, at the same time, links it to broader issues and long-term developments.

An accurate evaluation of Kennedy's trip is only possible if we examine the entire spectrum of historical sources. These sources include unpublished files and private papers found in German and American archives, the comprehensive press and television coverage on both sides of the Atlantic, and the memoirs of contemporaries.<sup>8</sup> Only comparative and multiarchival research brings to light much of what has been forgotten or unknown until now and can help lay more than one legend to rest. Such an approach can also elucidate the surprising origin of Kennedy's statement "*Ich bin ein Berliner*," so often quoted and so often misunderstood. Moreover, source-based analysis is not a privilege of diplomatic history alone but creates a broad and solid foundation for issues of cultural history. A close look at the sources explains the motivations and mind-sets of the actors involved and enables us to recognize the political and ideological frameworks and the emotional impact of the event with which we are dealing.

Second, I will use the Kennedy visit to examine the close interplay between politics, culture, and public opinion in the second half of the twentieth century. These three factors certainly do not exist independently of one another. Political decisions are shaped by culture and public opinion, which are in turn influenced by politics. Likewise, the realms of culture and public opinion are influenced by political decisions and thereby become political themselves.<sup>9</sup> An increasing number of attempts have been made recently to overcome the long-standing absence of dialogue between political and cultural historians. At least in the discipline of international relations history, we see a growing willingness to crawl out of old disciplinary trenches, abandon fruitless debates about the primacy of either foreign policy or domestic policy, and expand political history to include the history of culture and the history of society.<sup>10</sup>

Third, I would therefore like to emphasize the societal and cultural dimensions of transatlantic relations in particular. States, nations, and societies communicate with one another via governments and state institutions. This is why we usually speak of *international* relations. However, researchers in political science as well as in the historical sciences are increasingly recognizing that nongovernmental actors – for example, societal organizations, media, social networks, and lobbies – also contribute to these relations. International action at the governmental level and the action of actors originating from other societal contexts often mutually influence each other, as Thomas Risse has rightly argued. This is what is meant by the term *transnational*.<sup>11</sup> In

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relations between the United States and the Federal Republic of Germany after 1945 and especially in the story of America’s Berlin, both the German and American peoples played just as important a role as the governments involved; so too did certain individuals who were the embodiment of political clout, social engagement, and symbolic power, such as Lucius D. Clay, the acclaimed hero of the Berlin Airlift.

“ONE OF THE GREATEST DRAMAS”: POLITICS AS THEATER

The reconstruction of the event as a microhistory of the era; the interplay of politics, culture, and public opinion; and the transnational relations among West Berlin, the Federal Republic of Germany, and the United States – these three foci of this book are bound together by one underlying theme. I will present Kennedy’s trip to Germany as a political performance aimed at winning public consensus through symbolic acts. The nature of this trip can be best understood if we compare it to the way a stage play is prepared, produced, and ultimately received by the public. Such a comparison is not meant to suggest that the script for the trip had been written out in concrete detail years before, merely awaiting performance at the hands of some almighty director. No such director ever existed, and it is certainly not the place of the historian to assume such a role. Instead, this book attempts to present and to invite discussion about the idea that theater should not be understood merely as a metaphor for politics, but as an elementary form of politics in the era of mass public opinion.

Politics has always meant performance. Politics is a constant state of performance because the actions and statements that constitute politics only become political once they are presented and communicated to others in a social context. The study of social interaction, as conducted by Erving Goffman, has demonstrated how everyday social interactions are, to varying degrees, performances. Social actions portray a topic or issue by way of people performing on a stage before an audience that reacts to what it sees happening on that stage.<sup>12</sup> The theater analogy helps us understand the nature of the performance that influenced Kennedy’s visit and was inherent to Berlin politics following the blockade of the city’s western sectors in 1948 and 1949. The effort to stage events, script sequences, set political sceneries, and establish rapport with the audience permeated the Kennedy trip of 1963 and even at times dominated it.

To call politics a form of theater is certainly not unusual but often leaves a negative aftertaste, especially when politicians are referred to as actors. However, the analogy to the theatrical world is anything but a later invention

of historians. After the Second World War, the world viewed Berlin as a political stage. Contemporaries often used theatrical metaphors, referring to the Berlin situation as a “drama,” the city as a “showcase,” and the East–West border as the “Iron Curtain.” At the latest by 1948, when the Soviet Union started to blockade the city, West Berlin entered the spotlight of world attention. The city visibly symbolized the emerging East–West confrontation that was becoming known as the Cold War.<sup>13</sup> In 1963, an American president made his way to Berlin for the first time since Harry S. Truman had met with the wartime allies in Potsdam in 1945 to discuss the postwar order. Thus the city was particularly vulnerable to being seen as a political stage. Even before Kennedy’s departure, the *New York Times* reported that a “ceremonial spectacle” awaited the president. A year before his visit to the divided city, a major American industrialist had maintained that Berlin represented “the scene of one of the greatest dramas ever played by humans.”<sup>14</sup>

The interplay between theater and politics is in no way new. Even in Greek antiquity, politics not only developed out of public assemblies and theoretical reflection but also arose as a “political art” within the realm of classic theater.<sup>15</sup> The peripatetic visitations and rituals of kings in the Middle Ages were established as acts of symbolic politics for the benefit of the polity. In early modern France, the court life and self-aggrandizement of Louis XIV reflected and reinforced the concept of state. Later, the modern concept of the nation was symbolized and celebrated by rituals and festivities connected to the French Revolution and by commemorations of the storming of the Bastille. Spontaneous gatherings and hunger protests by the lower classes of Europe in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were forms of political “street theater,” as were, for example, parades in the towns and cities of the expanding American republic.<sup>16</sup> Thomas Nipperdey pointed out quite some time ago that, particularly in Germany, political architecture, civic celebrations, and the construction of national memorials in the nineteenth century established claims of political power. They formulated modes through which the connection between nationalism and civic culture could be understood and interpreted.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, political language in Germany had been imbued with metaphors from the theatrical world since the mid-nineteenth century. Politics was understood as stage-acting before a large audience, as David Blackbourn has shown. These ideas have stimulated very recent studies. Johannes Paulmann has underscored the importance of ritual appearances for the nineteenth century and deciphered monarchial trips and meetings between royal heads of state as the mirrors of systemic changes in the international system. Edgar Wolfrum has recently

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demonstrated how important public performances were for the political use of national history in the German postwar period.<sup>18</sup>

In 1963, however, any continuation of theatrical politics faced an enormous dilemma, especially in Germany. National Socialism had carried the use of rituals, theatrical practices, and certain symbols to an extreme. With Mussolini’s Fascist Italy having already paved the way,<sup>19</sup> the totalitarian regime in Germany aestheticized politics by a range of means that extended from encouraging a fetish for uniforms and the swastika to organizing cult celebrations for youth and staging grandiose events such as the Reich Party Congress. Such performances and symbols helped generate enormous pressure to conform and created the “alluring appearance of the Third Reich.”<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, the Nazi dictatorship elevated such practices to cult acts of consecration – its “political liturgies” – and used them to propagate a form of “political religion” that provided the ideological foundation for its genocidal policies.<sup>21</sup> Klaus Vondung, Hans-Ulrich Thamer, Wolfgang Hardtwig, and Hans Maier have emphasized the connection between mass rituals, politics, and the production of meaning in creating a sense of identity for both dictatorships and democracies.<sup>22</sup> As a consequence of Nazi practices, the staging of large-scale public events and the use of symbolic forms were fully discredited in the Federal Republic. They might prompt direct associations with the Nazi dictatorship at home and abroad and thus appear as writing on the wall with regard to the development of postwar Germany. Herein lay both the problem and the challenge facing any attempt to stage politics on German soil.

This book adopts the theater analogy even in its structure. The first chapter describes how the story line of America’s Berlin took shape following World War II. It identifies the main actors and describes the political context, giving particular attention to the development of American policy on Berlin in the years following the Airlift and to the international situation in the early 1960s. America’s special relationship with Berlin was sustained by a transnational culture of memory, this chapter demonstrates, and was promoted by a network of Berlin supporters in the United States. This network eventually counted Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson and Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy among its members, and their visits to West Berlin in 1961 and 1962, respectively, were the prologue for John F. Kennedy’s visit in 1963.

The second chapter describes the actual script for the president’s trip to Germany and its staging. The spotlight here is on Kennedy’s first days in West Germany and the haggling over politically sensitive points of protocol, the stage setting, and the itinerary of the trip. The dramaturgy of the visit was heavily influenced by the West German media and public. I will therefore

pay special attention to the way the political actors balanced both the wish to mobilize the public and the need to discipline it.

The third chapter of the book leads to the dramatic climax of the play. It describes Kennedy's triumphant motorcade through West Berlin and demonstrates that the political topography of his itinerary was highly laden with symbolism. This chapter also traces the surprising deviation Kennedy made from the script during his appearance in front of the Schöneberg City Hall and reveals the secret of the famous words "*Ich bin ein Berliner*."

The fourth chapter discusses what happened after "the curtain fell," both in the immediate aftermath and from a long-term historical perspective. It examines the reactions of the public in America and Europe, especially in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), as the way in which the public handled such a highly emotionalized spectacle. This chapter therefore includes the trip undertaken by Soviet party leader and head of state Nikita Khrushchev to East Berlin in answer to the Kennedy visit. Last but certainly not least, the chapter presents the reactions of Germans to the assassination of President Kennedy.

The fifth chapter explores why memories of the Kennedy visit have been reduced to only a few scenes. This epilogue then brings us back to the present by reviewing Robert F. Kennedy's visit to Berlin in 1964 and subsequent presidential visits, which throw light on the changes that have occurred in German-American relations.

#### "BEACON FOR FREEDOM": SYMBOLS AND POWER

Symbolic acts become increasingly important in relation to the degree that politics constitutes itself as a performance. Political symbols are sensory, metaphoric, and demonstrative acts and statements that aim to express a political message. They can include language uses; gestures; images; architectural styles, especially for edifices like monuments; or social events such as festivities, commemorations, anniversary and ceremonial rituals, as well as official visits. Therefore, symbolic acts are themselves political acts and can occur in connection with other acts – such as state formations, elections, governmental decisions, military actions, and treaty signings – in order to support and legitimize them.<sup>23</sup> Symbolic acts fulfill these tasks by creating opportunities for social experience, by appealing to popular sentiments, and by mobilizing approval among the population. This also holds true of memorial services for political figures, such as those held in West Germany on the occasion of Kennedy's assassination. Even Ronald Reagan's 1987 declaration, in outmoded Cold War rhetoric, that Berlin represented a "beacon for freedom" was an attempt to mobilize public approval.<sup>24</sup>

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Particularly in the social and cultural sciences, recent research on social constructions of reality has clearly shown that political symbols play a major role in our societies. They make it possible to produce and experience internal unity, coherence, and continuity in social relations. However, both social scientists and historians recognize that the character of such constructions is dependent on the period and context in which they exist.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, scholars use the term *invention* to clarify that symbols and ideas are not natural phenomena but originate in human acts and imaginations.<sup>26</sup> Still, political symbols are more than just a means to present or represent politics that are formulated and decided elsewhere. The use of political symbols can evolve into symbolic politics and divorce itself from the function of reinforcing other politics.

Symbolic politics is similar to other forms of politics in that it aims to increase power, prestige, and approval. It selects primarily symbolic acts to achieve concrete political ends.<sup>27</sup> Consequently, symbolic politics is more than illusion or mere show. It can be used in conjunction with other political forms to offer an independent decision-making option and an alternative type of action. The advantage of such politics is that it offers an array of instruments to impart meaning to political and social contexts.<sup>28</sup> With this book, I would like to show that the use of symbolic politics was a decisive factor at critical moments in German-American relations in overcoming crises and maintaining the transatlantic bond between the United States and the Federal Republic. Symbolic politics was also deployed to attack the East and isolate the GDR, which had been quick to emphasize political symbols after its founding. Parades of youth marching in the uniforms of East Germany’s Freie Deutsche Jugend (FDJ, the official communist youth organization) and waving red flags were interpreted in the West as an echo of Nazi practices. For good reasons, the West German government adopted, in its own words, a “position of moderation” toward such practices when representing itself.<sup>29</sup> Faced with the mass spectacle that Kennedy’s visit promised to be, the government found this very policy being put to the test in two ways. Would it be possible to find democratic forms of political theater to celebrate Kennedy that would free West Germany from Hitler’s shadow and at the same time disassociate the Federal Republic from the GDR?

**“LOOK UPON THIS CITY”: THE POLITICS OF VISIBILITY**

Political theater and symbolic acts are not the prerogatives of dictators alone, even if that often appears to be the case.<sup>30</sup> Both are basic political forms applicable to modern societies in the age of public opinion amplified by mass media. Nontotalitarian states and democratic nations alike are faced with the

question about how best to stage politics and evoke – via architecture, images, or the form and tone of language – a sense of political aesthetics that makes valid statements about their own societies. The planners of Kennedy's trip spent a major portion of their time on these aspects. They were supported by the mass media, which sought to keep an eye on every detail of the president's trip.

The idea of keeping an eye on things actually became a maxim for all participants. To have the American president “see – and be seen”<sup>31</sup> as much as possible was more than just one of the aims of Kennedy's trip to Germany: it was the main purpose. I would argue that the principle of seeing and being seen was part of a larger trend in the age of mass media, namely, a politics of visibility that wove together political action and appeals to the eye. In 1963, the politics of visibility became so important that we can even speak of the primacy of visibility.<sup>32</sup> Above all, the *politics of visibility* means to seek and achieve the visibility of actions, actors, and objects in order to articulate and strengthen political statements. The image of Kennedy in the Paulskirche, a former church in Frankfurt that has become the outstanding symbol of the German revolutionary movement of 1848, was juxtaposed with the image of the president at the Berlin Wall, the symbol of the deprivation of freedom for the people living in the communist state on the opposite side. Both of these images were deliberately sought for their political import. They were “public images” in which political statements and symbols often amalgamated into what Aby Warburg termed *Schlagbilder*, images that take on an iconic nature.<sup>33</sup>

The politics of visibility interprets the mutual process of seeing and being seen as a political statement. It aims to influence not only this process but also the people's perspective and attempts to use media coverage to publicize both the process and perspective. Actors are to be seen as observers as well as the objects of observation. They are allowed to see; indeed they should see. At the same time, the public should see them in the process of observing certain places or objects. Kennedy was not merely to stand next to or in front of the Berlin Wall: he was to look at the Wall and beyond it into East Berlin. In turn, the entire world was to see the picture of Kennedy looking eastward. In order to make the politics of visibility succeed, it is necessary to supply the requisite props – for example, binoculars, speaker podium, press stand – to help actors see as well as to document their viewing process and communicate this as a symbolic or allegoric public act. Thus, we can speak of a “political optic” that brings forth certain “visual strategies.”<sup>34</sup>

Such an optic was not specific to the twentieth century, but it did become particularly important then. During the Cold War, most actors, spectators,