

Andreas W. Daum. *Kennedy in Berlin*. Washington, D.C.: German Historical Institute, 2008. xxii + 294 pp. \$23.99, paper, ISBN 978-0-521-67497-3.



*Kennedy
in Berlin*

Andreas W. Daum



Reviewed by Frank Schumacher

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Commissioned by Thomas Adam (The University of Texas at Arlington)

On the eve of President John F. Kennedy's visit to Germany, June 23-26, 1963, the *New York Times* noted: "A trip abroad nowadays is nothing if it is not symbolic of interest and power" (quoted, pp. 75-76). State visits have indeed always had a decidedly symbolic dimension but the Cold War accentuated this desire for the performative, emotional, and theatrical because this confrontation was in many respects a fierce global competition for the hearts and minds of people everywhere. Massive Soviet and American public relations and propaganda campaigns attempted to isolate the respective opponent internationally, gain the approval of world opinion, and consolidate their spheres of influence. At the heart of the Cold War as "symbolic confrontation" was the competition for allies which were deemed important for political, economic, strategic, and psychological reasons.

Andreas W. Daum, professor of history at the State University of New York at Buffalo, provides us with an elegantly written and methodologically sophisticated case study of the multiple functions

of one of the most important symbolic and performative events in the history of twentieth-century German-American relations and alliance management, the visit of America's young and immensely popular thirty-fifth president to West Germany in the summer of 1963. This four-day trip and in particular Kennedy's speech at the Rathaus Schöneberg in Berlin, which he concluded with the famous phrase "Ich bin ein Berliner," became an iconic moment of alliance partnership, deeply enshrined in the collective memories of many Berliners and West Germans. This encounter in "America's Berlin" (p. 2), reinforced the city's and West Germany's transnational Atlantic orientation and "special relationship" with the United States.

Daum's study, first published in German in 2003, explores this visit on a micro-historical level and his thick description of the event yields insights into the psychology of alliance management as well as the emotional state of the public's response to the Cold War dynamic. It provides a richly textured account of the impact of political

symbolism on the popular underpinnings of the transatlantic relationship at the grassroots level.

The book consists of five main chapters. The introduction concisely outlines the study's analytical matrix and theoretical paradigms, which encompass the function of politics as theatre, symbols and power, the politics of visibility, emotions, and the role of charisma in community-building. In the first chapter, devoted to the historical background, Daum underlines the increasing tensions in early 1960s German-American relations as the intensified Franco-German rapprochement challenged the U.S. claim to hegemonic leadership in Western Europe. The United States for its part was interested in increased burden-sharing and feared a loosening of West Germany's Atlantic orientation. Differences in age, experience, and style of the respective political leaders on both sides exacerbated the situation.

In addition, the divided city of Berlin posed a major challenge to bilateral relations. The initial lack of visible high-level American attention to the wall built in August 1961 had provoked criticism that questioned Washington's determination to contain the Soviet Union and support its West German allies.

The second chapter analyzes the various planning stages of the president's visit. Initially, Kennedy's trip, part of a sweeping European tour, was heavily criticized at home. The escalating violence in the American South against the civil rights movement as well as serious doubts about the state of Euro-American relations prompted an outpouring of discontent. Once Kennedy arrived in Germany, however, those criticisms quickly turned into pride over the enthusiastic welcome he received from German and European audiences.

The planning of the visit was further complicated by multiple, overlapping, and sometimes conflicting interests and agendas on the German side. Once it became clear that the president would actually visit Berlin, jealous tensions be-

tween Chancellor Konrad Adenauer and West Berlin's Lord Mayor Willy Brandt over protocol and potential political gains accompanied the planning stages and the visit to the city itself. Daum nicely captures the dynamic of the president's tour of Germany. He examines Kennedy's arrival in Köln, his trip to Hanau, and the speech in Frankfurt where he outlined his vision of Atlantic partnership. The author underscores that the preparatory discussions over the trip to Berlin ultimately focused on the question of how to achieve the highest visibility: "to see, to be seen, and to publicize this visibility as much as possible throughout the world for the benefit of those not participating" (p. 115).

Chapter 3 is devoted to what would later be seen as the climax of Kennedy's Germany visit, the Berlin trip. Meticulous planning and unprecedented journalistic coverage by more than 1,500 journalists ensured that eight hours of *Berliner Luft* would receive widespread attention. The author skillfully analyzes Kennedy's speech before almost half a million spectators in Schöneberg and convincingly demonstrates the president's authorship of the now classic phrase "Ich bin ein Berliner." Daum also shows how Kennedy deviated from his original, more somber manuscript. Carried by the enthusiastic reception of the public, the president employed harsh Cold War rhetoric yet also symbolized hope and a new beginning.

Daum emphasizes the creative role of the audience. The public was by no means a passive recipient of carefully crafted messages and staged symbolism but appropriated the event in what was generally interpreted as democratic maturity. The sometimes hysterical dimensions of the "Kennedy Fever" were offset by the maintenance of a balance between freedom and discipline in police and public responses.

The most important foreign policy benefit resulting from Kennedy's trip was undoubtedly the favorable turn in German-American relations. Six

months after the signing of the Franco-German treaty, relations were once again on friendly terms: "From the experience of community building arose a new degree of political loyalty and legitimacy on behalf of the transatlantic alliance" (p. 174).

The president's visit also provoked reactions in Moscow and East Berlin. The USSR and its East German ally quickly responded with a visit by Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev to East Berlin only two days after Kennedy's departure. This response highlighted the importance attached to official inter-alliance state visits within the performative logic of the symbolic confrontation.

It was Kennedy's assassination only five months later, however, that, according to Daum, cemented the Berlin visit's iconic status in the imaginary archive of German-American relations. The outpouring of sympathy for the dead president attested to Kennedy's enormous popularity in West Germany and Berlin. As the author outlines in his final chapter, no other president since has been able to rival this unique moment of alliance symbolism and strong pro-American orientation. What Daum calls "a textbook example of the creation of political myth" became an unrivaled case for the power of political performance and symbolism (p. 201). The highly selective politics of memory of Kennedy's visit to Berlin preserved and reinforced a moment of unrivaled emotional and symbolic intensity in West Germany's Cold War alliance with the United States.

Kennedy in Berlin makes a number of valuable contributions. It provides detailed evidence for the importance of the symbolic dimension of the Cold War and thus advances a more nuanced understanding of the psychological dynamic of the East-West confrontation; it provides an important case study for the political and cultural configuration of the West German-American Cold War relationship; and finally, the study constitutes an excellent showcase for the potential insights to be gained from the new international

history. Methodologically innovative and theoretically grounded, Daum's nevertheless accessible study is ideally suited for advanced undergraduate and graduate seminars in the history of U.S. foreign relations, modern international history, the history of transatlantic relations, and the cultural history of the Cold War.

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