

## Chapter 11

### JFK, Berlin, and the Berlin Crises, 1961-1963

Robert G. Waite

When John Kennedy addressed the nation at his swearing-in ceremony on January 20, 1961, he had nothing to say about Berlin, about the on-going crisis over the status of the occupied and divided city. Rather, the newly elected President spoke on other issues, especially “the quest for peace” and the “struggle against the common enemy of man: tyranny, poverty, disease and war itself.”<sup>1</sup> Berlin would soon, however, gain his attention. Tensions in the divided city had been growing since the end of World War II and the Berlin Question became a full-blown international crisis in 1958 when Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev announced that the issue of Berlin had to be settled and that if the West did not agree to a peace treaty recognizing East Germany, the German Democratic Republic, his nation would. Access to Berlin would then fall to Walter Ulbricht and his communist government. Such actions meant that the allies would lose more than their strategic foothold in central Europe; their strength and determination to remain firm against the Communists would be thrown into doubt.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the absence of references to Berlin in his initial addresses as president, JFK had since his election victory begun to focus on Berlin, on the crises over the status of the divided city which could erupt at any time into a full-blown east-west confrontation. During his term of office as President, Kennedy took forceful and deliberate steps to reassure our European allies, West German leaders, and residents of

---

<sup>1</sup> “Inaugural Address. January 20, 1961,” in *Public Papers of the President of the United States, John F. Kennedy, January 20 to December 31, 1961* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1962), 1-2.

<sup>2</sup> The literature on the Berlin crisis is extensive and most view the tensions between Kennedy and Khrushchev as a test of political wills. See, for example, Charles Sargent Sampson, *Berlin Crisis, 1962-1963* (Washington D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1994); Honoré Marc Catudel, *Kennedy and the Berlin Wall Crisis* (Berlin: Berlin Verlag, 1980); Jack M. Schick, *The Berlin Crisis, 1958-1962* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971); Peter Wyden, *Wall: The Inside Story of Divided Berlin* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989); Michael Beschloss, *The Crisis Years: Kennedy and Khrushchev, 1960-1963* (New York: Edward Burlingame Books, 1991); the chapter “The Berlin Crisis” in Theodore C. Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 583-601; and Andreas W. Daum, *Kennedy in Berlin: Politik, Kultur und Emotionen im Kalten Krieg* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2003), who views JFK’s June 1963 visit as a high-point in post-war German-American relations and who examines the relationship within the context of the “cultural and emotional” fabric of the Cold War.

West Berlin, that the United States would stand by them, that the commitment to the post-war settlement remained unshakable. The way JFK handled the on-going crises over Berlin, the manner in which he responded to East German and Soviet challenges, the words of his speeches and television addresses, his very public art of diplomacy, and the historic visit to West Germany and Berlin in June 1963 reveal much about his leadership, his style of governing, and his effectiveness as President of the United States.

Berlin emerged as a source of contention between the Western allies – Britain, France and the United States – and the Soviet Union at the end of the Second World War when agreements divided the city into zones of occupation, each controlled by one of the allied powers.<sup>3</sup> As tensions mounted over the post-war settlement and the seemingly steady advance and aggressiveness of Communism, the importance of Berlin as a flash-point between the world powers grew. Well before the 1960 presidential campaign, John Kennedy became aware of the sensitivity of the Berlin question. In 1959 he told an interviewer that Berlin was to be a “test of nerve and will.”<sup>4</sup> While a Senator he served on the Foreign Relations Committee which held several hearings in 1959 on Berlin. Witnesses addressed the recent Soviet announcement of a deadline for a peace agreement with East Germany that would recognize its sovereignty. The Assistant Secretary for European Affairs told the Committee that it was imperative that the western nations, led by the United States, remain firmly committed to the maintenance of their “rights and position in Berlin, and access thereto” as specified in post-war agreements.<sup>5</sup>

In a speech on the floor of the US Senate on June 14, 1960, JFK elaborated his views on foreign policy, on dealing with the Soviets, on intentions for Berlin. Following the collapse of the U.S.-Soviet summit on May 10<sup>th</sup> and with the belligerence of Soviet Premier Khrushchev mounting, new approaches were desperately needed, the young senator told his colleagues. “The real issue of American foreign policy today...is the lack of long-range preparation, the lack of policy planning a coherent and purposeful national strategy backed by strength,” Kennedy explained.<sup>6</sup> Only a militarily strong and powerful US could negotiate effectively with the Soviet leadership. Senator Kennedy offered a

---

<sup>3</sup> See, *Dokumente zur Berlin-Frage 1944-1966* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1967).

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Theodore C. Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 583.

<sup>5</sup> “Statement of Livingston T. Merchant, Assistant Secretary for European Affairs, Department of State,” in *Executive Sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee*, volume XI (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1959), 159; see also the testimony on March 10, 1959, “The Berlin Situation,” 211-240. William Taubman, *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003), 403-412. See, Hans-Peter Schwarz, *Adenauer, Volume 2 Der Staatsmann 1952-1967* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1991), 550-557.

<sup>6</sup> “Remarks of Senator John F. Kennedy in the Senate, June 14, 1960,” John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, [www.jfklibrary.org/Historical+Resources](http://www.jfklibrary.org/Historical+Resources).

well thought out 12 point program for “long-term policies designed to increase the strength of the non-communist world,” and Point 8 called for a “long-range solution to the problems of Berlin,” a solution based on unshakable commitments to Berlin and Germany.<sup>7</sup>

During the 1960 presidential campaign, two West German leaders told the *New York Times* that they hoped both Senator Kennedy and Vice President Nixon “would take a firm position on Berlin” because they expected East German head of state Walter Ulbricht to “warm up the ‘cold war’.”<sup>8</sup> In the week prior to the November 8<sup>th</sup> election East Germany acted and “made a new inroad on the West’s position at Berlin” when its troops held several trucks bound for West Germany. The unpredictable Ulbricht moved again a month later when he “threatened... ‘serious disturbances’” in traffic to Berlin if a trade agreement was not ratified. The East German Communist leader “demanded that President-elect Kennedy attend a summit meeting next spring to resolve the Berlin crisis.”<sup>9</sup> Sentiment in East Germany was decidedly hostile to the new president. “One is reluctant to call this event an election,” commented East Germany’s leading newspaper, *Neues Deutschland*. “The so very important decision of who will be presented to the American people as candidates at all is decided in the small conventions of both bourgeoisie parties. They are nothing other than the political arm of big capitalist interests.” The newspaper termed both candidates “apostles of American imperialism” and saw little difference between them.<sup>10</sup> Walter Ulbricht’s East Germany was preparing to step up the pressure on Berlin.

Recognizing the growing tensions over Berlin, commentators and pundits in the US called upon president-elect Kennedy to begin addressing them immediately. Roscoe Drummond wrote in the *Washington Post* that Berlin merited special attention during the months prior to the inauguration.<sup>11</sup> John Kennedy did spend time studying carefully two lengthy memoranda on foreign policy, one by Paul Nitze on “national security” issues and a second by Adlai Stevenson on foreign policy. Each identified Berlin a central issue because “the chances are that among their [leaders of the Communist nations meeting at the Kremlin] decisions will be efforts to test the mettle of the new American President -

---

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> “Berliner Court Candidates’ Aid,” *New York Times* (hereafter NYT) (July 24, 1960).

<sup>9</sup> Gaston Coblenz, “German Reds Make New Berlin Inroad,” NYT (November 8, 1960). “Reds Hint Curbs on Berlin Trains,” *NYT* (December 19, 1960). “Ulbricht Seeks Kennedy ‘Summit’,” NYT (December 19, 1960).

<sup>10</sup> “Kennedy ist neuer Präsident der USA,” and “Der neue Hut,” *Neues Deutschland* (November 10, 1960).

<sup>11</sup> Roscoe Drummond, “The Transition. U.S. Can’t Afford Standstill Period,” the *Washington Post* (hereafter WP) (November 7, 1960). See, Marquis Childs, “The Problems Of Transition,” WP (November 8, 1960).

perhaps on Berlin early next year.”<sup>12</sup> By early January, the newly elected President and Secretary of State-designate Dean Rusk “decided to look to this country’s most eminent Sovietologists for advice in helping frame policy for the years immediately ahead,” the *New York Times* reported.<sup>13</sup>

West German political leaders spoke up and they urged President-elect Kennedy to act forcefully on the Berlin question. Already on November 10<sup>th</sup>, Chancellor Konrad Adenauer “suggested” a meeting between JFK and Khrushchev to address a number of issues. Adenauer also anticipated a visit to Germany by President Kennedy the next spring and that he “to put West Berlin on his itinerary,” making him the first US president to visit the divided city.<sup>14</sup> For the German Chancellor a Presidential visit was urgent because he “expects a serious Berlin crisis in the spring and wants to talk it over with Mr. Kennedy.”<sup>15</sup> Adenauer and the leaders of France and Britain wanted a strong statement on the continuing presence of American forces in Europe, much as Eisenhower had provided. Shortly after the inauguration, the American ambassador to Germany “declared [that] the United States will not abandon its commitments to Berlin,” as he moved to offer reassurances<sup>16</sup>

Berlin came to be one of the most persistent and troublesome international issues faced by President Kennedy. It was, however, one of more than half a dozen hot-spots around the globe that threatened to push the US and Soviet Union to nuclear conflagration. During the first months in office, JFK had strikingly little to say about Berlin.<sup>17</sup> West German leaders sent notes of congratulation to the president-elect. In a joint telegram, Chancellor Adenauer and Federal President Lübke congratulated JFK and assured him of the friendship and trust of the German people. They emphasized the

---

<sup>12</sup> Chalmers M. Roberts, “Kennedy Charts Possible Courses,” WP (November 20, 1960). See also Drew Pearson, “Rusk Called Middle-of-the-Roader,” WP (December 17, 1960); and Murrey Marder, “Major Shifts in Foreign Policy Handling Forecast,” WP (January 15, 1960).

<sup>13</sup> “Mr. Kennedy’s ‘Sovietologists,’” NYT (January 9, 1961). Sorensen, *Kennedy*, p. 583.

<sup>14</sup> “Begegnung mit Kennedy im February,” *Der Tagespiegel* (West Berlin) November 11, 1960. Flora Lewis, “K-Kennedy Arms Talks Suggested by Adenauer,” WP (November 11, 1960). “Kennedy Trip Seen. Adenauer Aide Says Visit to Europe in ‘61 Is Likely,” NYT (November 12, 1960). See, “Brandt Hails Kennedy,” NYT (November 14, 1960).

<sup>15</sup> Flora Lewis, “Bonn Hears Kennedy Plans European Trip,” NYT (December 19, 1960).

<sup>16</sup> On West German sentiment, see “Unsere Meinung: Kennedy und die Berliner,” *Tagesspiegel* (November 10, 1960). “U.S. Stands By Berlin, Envoy Says,” WP (January 27, 1961).

<sup>17</sup> Khrushchev was, however, eager to negotiate on Berlin, writes Taubman in his authoritative biography, *Khrushchev*, 486-490.

“bond of fate” linking the two nations in their commitment of freedom and applauded the United States for its unflagging leadership, thereby strongly reminding the newly elected president of West Germany’s needs and expectations in the coming years, namely unyielding support and backing at any cost.<sup>18</sup> In a radio broadcast West Berlin mayor Willy Brandt applauded JFK and assured listeners that “our faith in the future is also the result of the determination and clarity that President Kennedy stated that America is prepared at all cost to maintain freedom and to ensure the victory of freedom.”<sup>19</sup>

At a February 1, 1961, press conference the President was asked specifically about Berlin and he answered succinctly: “There is no change in our view on Berlin.” His statements reflected the views of the State Department which in a spring 1961 memorandum asserted: “However impelling the urge to find some new approach to the Berlin problem, the facts of the situation strictly limit the practical courses of action open to the West.” Of foremost importance was “the maintenance of a credible deterrent against unilateral Soviet action” on Berlin.<sup>20</sup>

JFK explained his silence on Berlin to the West German foreign minister at a February 19<sup>th</sup> meeting. “The President was anxious to have the Germans understand the reason why his Administration had so far been silent on the Berlin question except for a comment made in answer to one question during a press conference,” a memo of the discussion noted. “This did not by any means signify a lessening of United States interest in the Berlin question,” the President insisted. “As long as there was a lull, however, he had not wanted to provoke either action or comment in the matter,” largely because JFK “expected renewed pressure by the Soviets in the coming months.”<sup>21</sup> Hoping to clarify the stand of the US, West German Chancellor Adenauer came to Washington in April 1961 for a series of discussions with the President and members of Congress. The talks were fruitful, and in a joint communiqué the two leaders “reaffirmed the position of their Governments that only through the application of the principle of self-determination can a just and enduring solution be found for the problem of Germany including Berlin.” Furthermore, “they renewed their pledge to preserve the freedom of the people of West

---

<sup>18</sup> “Lübke und Adenauer an Kennedy,” *Tagesspiegel* (January 20, 1961). See also, Manfred George, “Das schwerste Amt der Welt,” *Tagesspiegel* (January 20, 1961). For examples of the Soviet response, see “Shakhav on Inaugural Address” and “Pravda on Address,” in Foreign Broadcast Information Service (henceforth, FBIS), January 21 and 23, 1961. Schwarz, Adenauer, p. 629.

<sup>19</sup> “Brandt begrüßt Kennedys Antrittsrede,” *Tagesspiegel* (January 24, 1961).

<sup>20</sup> “15. The President’s News Conference of February 1, 1961,” in *Public Papers of the President, John F. Kennedy*, 37-38; and “222. Remarks and Questions and Answers at the Press Luncheon in Paris. June 2, 1961,” 433. “12. Paper Prepared in the Department of State,” in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963* (hereafter *FRUS*), Volume XIV *Berlin Crisis 1961-1962* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1963), 33-34.

<sup>21</sup> “5. Memorandum of Conversation,” February 17, 1961, *FRUS*, Volume 14, 9.

Berlin pending the reunification of Germany in peace and freedom and the restoration of Berlin as the capital of a reunified country.”<sup>22</sup>

Soviet Premier Khrushchev did not remain quiet for long. In early January 1961 he reiterated the call for a separate peace agreement with East Germany. Khrushchev made it clear, once again, that “he would not shrink from war if the ‘capitalist’ and ‘imperialist’ powers resist a Communist victory” in the divided city, the *New York Times* reported. The expulsion of US, British and French footholds in Berlin was “the immediate objective.” Khrushchev acted at this time for several reasons, including the fact that Berlin was a convenient point for leveraging and pressuring the West, that his prestige was involved, that pressure from Ulbricht was a real concern to him, and that the current Berlin situation threatened the stability of East Germany.<sup>23</sup> As tensions rose in the spring, JFK directed the Department of Defense to “report to him promptly on current military planning for a possible crisis over Berlin.”<sup>24</sup>

The next crisis came in June 1961 at the summit meeting in Vienna with Khrushchev, when the two heads of state addressed seven trouble spots.<sup>25</sup> At the conclusion of the summit, the Soviets handed US officials an aid memoire, outlining their position on Berlin which also attacked the West German government for its “saber-rattling militarism” and its advocacy of “the revision of the German frontiers and the results of the Second World War.” The Soviets called once more for a peace treaty making Berlin a “demilitarized free city.”<sup>26</sup> The summit concluded with “a sharp three-hour disagreement on all questions concerning Germany and Berlin,” wrote James Reston in the *New York Times*. JFK left Vienna “in a solemn...mood,” largely because “on the big disputes between Washington and Moscow he had found absolutely no new grounds for encouragement.”<sup>27</sup> A joint statement issued on June 4<sup>th</sup>, at the end of two days of

---

<sup>22</sup> “The White House...Joint Communique,” April 13, 1961, National Archives and Record Administration (henceforth, NARA), CIA declassification project (these records are available only in the NARA Library). Schwarz, *Adenauer*, 633-637.

<sup>23</sup> “Challenge to a New President,” NYT (January 20, 1961). “4. Telegram From the Embassy in the Soviet Union to the Department of State,” February 4, 1961, *FRUS* volume XIV, 6-7. Taubman, *Khrushchev*, 396-441.

<sup>24</sup> “National Security Action Memorandum No. 41, Subject: Military Planning for a Possible Berlin Crisis,” April 23, 1961, [www.jfklibrary.org](http://www.jfklibrary.org).

<sup>25</sup> “26. Position Paper Prepared in the Department of State,” May 25, 1961, “Berlin and Germany,” *FRUS* volume XIV, 71-75. William J. Jordan, “Issues at Vienna: Seven Major Conflicts Between the Big Two,” NYT (June 4, 1961). For an explanation of Khrushchev’s stand, see Taubman, *Khrushchev*, 493-500. Richard Reeves, *President Kennedy. Profile of Power* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 157-158.

<sup>26</sup> Sorensen, *Kennedy*, pp. 584-586. “Telegram, To: Secretary of State,” June 5, 1961, NSA, Berlin Crisis, #59 BC02081. See, Osgood Caruthers, “Khrushchev Sets Dec. 31 Deadline For German Pact,” NYT (July 16, 1961).

<sup>27</sup> James Reston, “Vienna Talks End,” NYT (June 5, 1961). See also Murrey

“useful meetings,” noted simply that the leaders had discussed Germany and other issues. The statement contained no mention of Berlin.<sup>28</sup>

After consulting with the French and British governments, the President responded on July 19, 1961, to the Soviet aide memoire on Berlin, dismissing it as “a document which speaks of peace but threatens to disturb it.” JFK stated that the “the real intent” was to have East Berlin “formally absorbed into the so-called German Democratic Republic while West Berlin, even though called a ‘free city’, would lose the protection presently provided by the Western Powers and become subject to the will of a totalitarian regime.”<sup>29</sup> The President’s resolve stiffened and he started to fully articulate his stand on Berlin in terms that the public could respond to. His rhetoric began to play a key role in shaping the mounting crisis over Berlin.

On the evening of July 25<sup>th</sup> the President stated his position to the American people in a lengthy radio and television broadcast. After summarizing the discussions with the Khrushchev and Soviet leaders, JFK stated that strong measures - a far-reaching military buildup - would be undertaken to ensure “our legal rights to be in West Berlin and ... to make good on our commitment to the two million free people of that city.” The President viewed the threat to Berlin as a “threat to free men” everywhere, thereby universalizing the danger.<sup>30</sup> Not wanting to over react, he chose his words carefully, determined to state in unmistakable terms the US commitment to Berlin, but also careful “not to drive the crisis beyond the point of no return,” advisor Arthur Schlesinger Jr. recalled.<sup>31</sup> On this occasion as well and other crucial moments in the on-going crises over Berlin, JFK was unwavering in his stand. “We cannot and will not permit the Communists to drive us out of Berlin, either gradually or by force,” he asserted in the radio and television address. “West Berlin...has many roles. It is more than a showcase of liberty, a symbol, an island of freedom in the Communist sea. It is...a beacon of hope

---

Marder, “Kennedy, Khrushchev Conclude ‘Useful’ Talks,” WP (June 5, 1961).

<sup>28</sup> “225. Joint Statement Following Discussions With Premier Khrushchev in Vienna, June 4, 1961,” *Public Papers of the President, John F. Kennedy, 1961*, 438. Taubman, *Khrushchev*, 495, 499, 503.

<sup>29</sup> “292. Statement by the President Concerning the U.S. Reply to the Soviet Government’s Aide Memoire on Germany and Berlin. July 19, 1961,” *Public Papers of the Presidents, John F. Kennedy, 1961*, 521-522. “United States Note in Reply to the Soviet aide-mémoire of 4 June, 17 July 1961,” in D.C. Watt, editor, *Documents on International Affairs 1961* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 323-329.

<sup>30</sup> “302. Radio and Television Report to the American People on the Berlin Crisis. July 25, 1961,” *Public Papers of the President, John F. Kennedy, 1961*, 533-536. On the significance of the military build-up, a show of strength to convince Khrushchev that the US had sufficient forces in Berlin to prevent “any cheap and easy seizure of the city by East German guards alone,” see Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 588.

<sup>31</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 391.

behind the Iron Curtain.”<sup>32</sup>

As these strong statements make clear, the President made rhetorical choices, using carefully chosen expressions and phrases to rally support at home, to assure allies abroad, and to demonstrate convincingly to the Soviets that the US would stand firm on Berlin, even at the risk of nuclear war. His words resonated through West Germany and Berlin. In the address to the American people, JFK employed “rhetorical juxtapositions,” the pairing of opposite terms to make his points.<sup>33</sup> Speaking directly to the American people, the President sought, first, to reassure and express his solidarity with the audience by voicing their concerns as well, concerns that the US operate through strength and preparedness while at the same time the country strongly desired a peaceful solution. “We seek peace - but we shall not surrender.”<sup>34</sup> Second, JFK contrasted the sharp differences between the policies of the West and the Soviet Union on Berlin. All of the Soviet’s actions were anthesis to those of the West and he presented the current situation as a standoff between the evil East and virtuous West. Third, JFK made Berlin relevant to his audience by placing the city in a broader context, insisting that the “isolated outpost” was “not an isolated problem.” His immediate call for bolstering the military, clearly a direct result of the current Berlin crisis, was tied to long-term plans and the recent announcement by the Soviets that they were significantly increasing the size of their armed forces. Being strong militarily and showing an unwillingness to back down was crucial to the maintenance of peace, the President maintained.<sup>35</sup> Fourth, JFK linked individual with collective action as he urged Americans to be willing to “pay their fair share, and not leave the burden of defending freedom entirely to those who bear arms.” These burdens, the President stated, “must be borne if freedom is to be defended – Americans have willingly borne them before – and they will not flinch from the task now.” The President also called upon Congress to allocate the funds needed for the military build-up. These moves were essential to the US having “a wider choice than humiliation or all-out nuclear action.”<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> “302. Radio and Television Report,” 539.

<sup>33</sup> Kevin W. Dean, “‘We Seek Peace - But We Shall Not Surrender’: JFK’s Use of Juxtaposition for Rhetorical Success in the Berlin Crisis,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* XXI(Summer 1991), 536. The following discussion relies heavily on Dean’s article. See also, Theodore O. Windt, Jr., “John F. Kennedy. Presidential Speechwriting as Rhetorical Collaboration,” in Kurt Ritter and Martin J. Medhurst, editors, *Presidential Speechwriting. From the New Deal to the Reagan Revolution and Beyond* (College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2003), 92-107; and Denise M. Bostdorff, *The Presidency and the Rhetoric of Foreign Crisis* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1994), 5-24.

<sup>34</sup> “U.S. Believes West Must Hold Berlin As Fateful Symbol,” NYT (July 9, 1961).

<sup>35</sup> “302. Radio and Television Report,” 533. Dean, “JFK’s Use of Juxtaposition,” 537-538. “Khrushchev Halts Troop Reduction; Araises Arms Fund,” and “Excerpts From Khrushchev’s Address on Arms Policy,” NYT (July 9, 1961). Bostdorff, *The Presidency and the Rhetoric of Foreign Crisis*, 7-10.

<sup>36</sup> “302. Radio and Television Report,” 535-537. Dean, “JFK’s Use of Juxtaposition,” 539, 541. The JFK administration came to be very effective in using the media to get its

Following the Vienna summit, tensions persisted and events in Berlin threatened to boil over. During the night of August 12<sup>th</sup>, East German forces from the police and army descended upon the tenuous border with the western sectors. The troops acted quickly, stretching barbed wire, closing the border and halting all traffic with the West. The East German regime took this drastic measure for a number of reasons,<sup>37</sup> and it claimed that the fence was necessary because the border had been “abused for espionage purposes” and because of “continuing provocations.”<sup>38</sup> West Berlin Mayor Willy Brandt was outraged by the border closure and in a speech to a rally of an estimated 250,000 individuals called upon the West to respond “not merely [with] words but political action. Woe to us if through indifference or moral weakness we do not pass the test,” Brandt warned. “Then the Communists will not stop at the Brandenburg Gate. They will not stop at the zone border. They will not stop on the Rhine.”<sup>39</sup>

The construction of the Berlin Wall was a serious blow to Allied policy, and it threatened to erode the faith of West Berliners in the promises of the western powers to protect and guarantee the city. That “both West Berlin and West Germany might lose confidence in the West” had become a real “danger,” the *New York Times* commented.<sup>40</sup> JFK responded with strong but limited action including troop reinforcements for Berlin, measures short of direct confrontation with the East Germans or Soviets. On August 18, 1961, he directed Vice President Lyndon Johnson to travel to Berlin on “an important mission,” telling him, “The main purpose of your mission is to reassure the people of West Berlin.” In a letter to West Berlin Mayor Willy Brandt, JFK expressed his “revulsion” at “the measures taken by the soviet Government and its puppets in East Germany.” The President called for strong measures and “decided that the best immediate response is a significant reinforcement of the Western garrisons,” a strengthening of Allied troops in Berlin.<sup>41</sup> Mayor Brandt had wanted a stronger response from the American president. JFK’s letter, calm in tone, went far in clarifying for Brandt and other West German

---

message across; see Bostdorff, *The Presidency and the Rhetoric of Foreign Crisis*, 33-37.

<sup>37</sup> *Dokument zur Berlin-Frage*, 464-465. Corey Ross, “East Germans and the Berlin Wall: Popular Opinion and Social Change before and after the Border Closure of August, 1961,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 39(2004), 25-43. Sorensen, *Kennedy*, pp. 593-594.

<sup>38</sup> Sydney Gruson, “City Still Uneasy,” NYT (August 15, 1961). Flora Lewis, “Border Closing Angers Crowds On Both Sides,” WP (August 14, 1961).

<sup>39</sup> Sydney Gruson, “Brandt Note to Kennedy Urges ‘Political Action,’ Not Just Talk, On Berlin,” NYT (August 17, 1961).

<sup>40</sup> “Berlin: First Round,” NYT (August 19, 1961). For an assessment of German reactions, see CIA, “Current Intelligence Weekly Summary,” August 17, 1961, National Security Archive, Washington DC (NSA), Berlin Crisis, #41, BC02323. Brian Ladd, *The Ghosts of Berlin* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 12-25.

<sup>41</sup> The White House, August 18, 1961, letter, JFK to Vice President Lyndon Johnson, NSA, Berlin Crisis, #37, BC02351. The White House, August 18, 1961, letter, JFK to Mayor Brandt,” NSA, Berlin Crisis, #36 BC02352.

political figures the position of the United States, that it supported West Berlin<sup>42</sup>

A memo on the Vice President Johnson's meeting with the West German Chancellor commented that "the real situation in Germany was reflected in the warm, friendly, enthusiastic greeting the Vice President had received."<sup>43</sup> Newspaper accounts echoed that sentiment. "Mr. Johnson's presence and his words had an electric effect on the city," observed a reporter for the *New York Times*. "There were tears and cheers as he spoke to a crowd estimated at 300,000." Although he said "essentially nothing new," the visit and powerful words of support had their desired effect. The Vice-President directed some carefully chosen remarks to listeners in East Berlin, telling them: "Do not lose courage, for while tyranny may seem for the moment to prevail, its days are counted."<sup>44</sup> East German radio answered his call with a terse announcement: "Here is the latest weather report: Hurricane Johnson turned out to be harmless."<sup>45</sup>

In his report to the President, Lyndon Johnson wrote: "From my opening statement to my message of farewell it was my constant purpose to remove doubts and anxieties about American policy in the face of the new communist challenge." The Vice President added that Germans regarded the present crisis as "essentially a confrontation of power between the Soviet Union and the United States." Johnson saw an opportunity to raise support among Americans for the administration's strong stand on Berlin. "While the whole world is watching Berlin we have a greater opportunity than we have ever had to drive home the unforgettable contrast between despotism and a free society." The record of Soviet presence is "a record of shame, of repression."<sup>46</sup>

Tensions did not ease. During August and September, East German police and military confronted US soldiers on several occasions.<sup>47</sup> In a November 1961 interview with a Soviet journalist, President Kennedy stated bluntly: "Berlin and Germany have become, I think, areas of heightened crisis since the Vienna meeting, and I think extremely dangerous to the peace."<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> *Dokumente zur Berlin Frage*, 479. Sorensen, Kennedy, 593-595. See the analysis in Diethelm Prowe, "Der Brief Kennedys and Brandt vom 18. August 1961," *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 33(1985), 373-375.

<sup>43</sup> "Memorandum of Conversation," Bonn Germany, August 19, 1961, NSA, Berlin Crisis, #35 BC02364, 3.

<sup>44</sup> Sydney Gruson, "300,000 Applaud. Vice President Tells Them Washington Will Not Forget," and "Text of Johnson Speech," NYT (August 20, 1961).

<sup>45</sup> "Red Radio Gibes at Johnson," NYT (August 21, 1961).

<sup>46</sup> "Memorandum, To: The President, From: The Vice President," August 21, 1961, NSA, Berlin Crisis, #34, BC02375, pp. 1-3. Tad Szulc, "Kennedy Expects 'Difficult Weeks' On Berlin Crisis," NYT (August 22, 1961).

<sup>47</sup> The incidents are described in *Facts on File Yearbook 1961*, Volume XXI (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1962), 335. See, *Dokumente zur Berlin Frage*, 530-539.

<sup>48</sup> "Transcript of Interview between the President and Aleksei Adzhubei (Editor of IZVESTIA)," November 25, 1961, NARA, CIA declassified files.

JFK went on to explain his opposition to a peace treaty between Russia and the German Democratic Republic, an agreement he described as “dangerous” because “the treaty will deny us our rights in West Berlin, rights which we won through the war, rights which were agreed to by the Soviet Union, the United States, Britain and France at the conclusion of the war, and which should be continued.” The President also voiced his deep concern that an agreement turning control of access to Berlin to East German authorities would permit, even encourage, them to “interfere with that right of access.” That would not to be tolerated or permitted to happen.<sup>49</sup> By stating his position to a Russian journalist, JFK was certain that his warnings would be heard loudly in the Kremlin.

During 1962 friction between East and West persisted and Khrushchev made repeated calls for a peace treaty and threatened to enact such an agreement with East Germany, the same cards played against former President Eisenhower. On May 20<sup>th</sup>, for example, the Soviet premier “warned the United States...that it would be dangerous to allow Chancellor Adenauer to delay an agreement on Berlin and Germany.” President Kennedy responded the next day with renewed pledges to Bonn “that West Germany’s interests will be safeguarded.”<sup>50</sup> In June, the Soviets protested “provocative” incidents along the wall dividing Berlin, and in fact both super powers grew concerned, fearful “that serious incidents could get out of hand and involve military units of the big powers.” These incidents included a series of four explosions that “tore holes in the Communist built wall” and a West Berlin police official identified as responsible “an active movement to get down the Eastern border fortifications.” East German officials warned that such incidents “could bring military clashes.”<sup>51</sup> Khrushchev issued a statement on June 9<sup>th</sup>, voicing his concern over “several dangerous provocations on the part of the West Berlin police.” He noted also that on at least three occasions explosions have ripped the wall. The Soviet premier condemned these as the work of the “revanchists and militarists in West Berlin” and called for the actions to be taken to ensure “that no dangerous provocations are allowed against the G.D.R.”<sup>52</sup> By the end of the year little had changed, with Khrushchev continuing to press for a peace treaty and President Kennedy stating yet again “that a solution of the German question can be found only in the preservation of the right of self-determination and that the freedom and viability of Berlin will be preserved in all circumstances and with all means.”<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>49</sup> “Memorandum, subject: Brief of Interview between the President and Aleksei Adzhubei,” November 30, 1961, NARA, CIA, declassified files.

<sup>50</sup> Seymour Topping, “Soviet Sees Peril in Berlin Delays,” NYT (May 21, 1962). Sydney Gruson, “Kennedy Renews Pledges to Bonn,” NYT (May 22, 1962).

<sup>51</sup> Max Frankel, “Soviet Protests Berlin Incidents,” NYT, June 9, 1962. “Four Blasts in 15 Minutes Rip Reds’ Wall in Berlin,” and “East Germans Warn West,” NYT (May 27, 1962).

<sup>52</sup> “Text of Soviet Note on Berlin Shootings,” NYT (June 9, 1962).

<sup>53</sup> Department of State, “Intelligence Note: Soviet Intentions on Berlin in the Light of Recent Private Remarks by Khrushchev,” NSA, Berlin Crisis, #9, BC02857. “508. Joint Statement Following Discussions With Chancellor Adenauer. November 15, 1962,” *Papers of the Presidents of the United States, John F. Kennedy, January 1 to December 31, 1962* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1963), 825.

The long discussed presidential visit to Germany came only in June 1963. The announcement of a presidential trip to Italy, followed by a stop in Germany for a short “working visit,” came in January. “A side trip to Berlin had been rejected,” the *New York Times* reported in March, because the President chose “not to make a political ‘demonstration’ that might needlessly increase tension in that divided city and possibly impede constructive discussions between the United States and the Soviet Union.”<sup>54</sup> Political leaders in Germany hoped to still persuade JFK that a stop in Berlin, however brief, was important. A high ranking member of Adenauer’s ruling party extended a public invitation in early March, and the first public statement of a planned visit came at a March 21<sup>st</sup> press conference when a journalist asked the President “do you plan to visit Berlin” on the forthcoming trip to Germany and Italy. JFK answered simply: “I would hope that when I go to Germany that I would go to Berlin.”<sup>55</sup>

The itinerary for this “informal working visit,” as the State Department referred to JFK’s trip to several West German cities and a single-day in Berlin, was released on June 18<sup>th</sup>. The President recognized the significance of the journey, and the State Department concluded that it “can be expected to attract more public attention and interest than any previous visit by a foreign statesman to modern Germany.” The visit came when the Kremlin seemingly had lost direction and initiative, thereby offering the President a window of opportunity to voice in the strongest terms and by his very presence the unflagging support of the United States.<sup>56</sup>

Preparations had begun in earnest months earlier. On May 9<sup>th</sup>, press secretary Pierre Salinger traveled to Berlin and he “made a whirlwind tour of the route President Kennedy will probably follow,” the *Washington Post* reported.<sup>57</sup> For JFK the side-trip to Berlin had far-reaching significance. Following an on-going foreign policy battle with the Soviet premier and facing criticism at home on the necessity of an European trip, the President clearly believed that a stop in Berlin would make a powerful statement of US commitment to Berlin and the western alliance. “While officially labeled ‘informal working visit’, the President’s trip to West Germany and Berlin will have many of the trappings of a state visit and can be expected to attract more public attention and interest than any previous visit by a foreign statesman to modern Germany,” a State Department official wrote in a June 14<sup>th</sup> memorandum.<sup>58</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> “President Is Said To Bar Berlin Visit,” NYT (March 6, 1963).

<sup>55</sup> “Kennedy Is Give Berlin Visit Bid,” WP (March 12, 1963). “107. The President’s News Conference of March 21, 1963,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States. John F. Kennedy, January 1 to November 22, 1963* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1964), 274.

<sup>56</sup> “Kennedys Program in Berlin,” *Der Tagesspiegel* (West Berlin) (June 19, 1963). “194. Paper Prepared in the Department of State,” June 14, 1963,” FRUS, volume XV, 525. On “the lack of clear-cut direction” in the Kremlin, see Eldon Griffiths, “Groping in the Kremlin,” WP (March 16, 1963).

<sup>57</sup> “Pierre Salinger Pre-Views Berlin,” WP (May 10, 1963).

<sup>58</sup> “Paper Prepared in the Department of State,” June 14, 1963, FRUS.

JFK's European trip aroused critics at home and abroad who gave him "strong advice" that "the trip is neither necessary nor desirable," a reporter for the *New York Times* wrote. Domestic critics cited the growing racial tensions, unrest and violence in the South that needed the President's undivided attention. The reporter added, however, "for him to cancel the trip on the grounds of racial disturbances at home are so bad he cannot leave the country would be a sad admission which would undermine faith in America." Furthermore, much of the political uneasiness in Europe stemmed from "questions regarding American policy" although tensions with the Allies had eased considerably and JFK "thinks his presence may be of vast importance at this time."<sup>59</sup> According to a West Berlin daily newspaper, *Der Tagesspiegel*, President Kennedy also "wanted direct contact with the people...The President will personally renew the commitment to Berlin."<sup>60</sup> That observation was right - a strong show of US determination to West Berlin outweighed any further formal discussions of its status. The trip to Germany and Berlin would go far in setting the tone for next series of discussions with the Western allies and with Premier Khrushchev.<sup>61</sup>

On June 10<sup>th</sup>, just prior to the European trip, JFK delivered at Washington's American University one of the most important speeches on U.S. foreign policy when he called for new discussions with the Soviet Union on the question of atomic weapons' testing. It was a speech that also called for an end to the Cold War, for a new way of looking at peace, at solving world problems, at cooperating with the Soviet Union.<sup>62</sup> The tone was strikingly conciliatory and the President offered specific steps toward a stronger peace. East German authorities praised the speech, terming it "the most far-reaching statement by an American president since the Second World War" on the "policy of peaceful coexistence against the politics of the American imperialists in the 'cold war'."<sup>63</sup> The speech appeared to set the tone for the forthcoming

---

<sup>59</sup> On Allied tensions, see Hans B. Meyer, "Kennedy kommt programmgemäß," TAGGESSPIEGEL (June 8, 1963). Carroll Kilpatrick, "Kennedy Differs With His Critics On Necessity of European Trip," WP (June 16, 1963). Tom Wicker, "Policy Gain Seen in Kennedy's Trip," NYT (June 21, 1963). A sense of the extent of racial violence can be gained from The New York Times Chronology, June 1963, [www.jfklibrary.org/jfk/templates/ArchivesNYTChronology](http://www.jfklibrary.org/jfk/templates/ArchivesNYTChronology). See, Central Intelligence Agency, "The Situation in West Berlin. Special Report. Office of Current Intelligence," June 14, 1963, [www.foia.cia.gov](http://www.foia.cia.gov).

<sup>60</sup> "Kennedy ändert Reisepläne...Kontakt mit der Bevölkerung gewünscht," *Tagesspiegel* (June 6, 1963).

<sup>61</sup> See, Murrey Marder, "Unforeseen Consequences. President's Trip Expected to Affect NATO's Future and Moscow Talks," WP (June 23, 1963).

<sup>62</sup> "232. Commencement Address at American University in Washington. June 10, 1963," *Public Papers of the Presidents, JFK, 1963*, 459-464. "A Strategy of Peace," WP (June 11, 1963).

<sup>63</sup> "Wochenbericht über feindliche Manöver, Absichten und Maßnahmen gegen die DDR (2.6.-15.6.63)," Bundesbeauftragte für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der

European visit.

When the White House announced the President's schedule for the 10-day European trip it became clear that after stops in Cologne, Bonn, and Frankfurt, JFK would fly to West Berlin, arriving there on the morning of Wednesday, June 26<sup>th</sup> and departing that afternoon. In Berlin, he planned to give three speeches and stops to view the Wall at the Brandenburg Gate and Checkpoint Charlie.<sup>64</sup> West German media covered his visit to Berlin in depth – more than 1,200 journalists were accredited. Television and radio carried the historic visit live and broadcast the President's day in Berlin to millions in West Germany and to many residents of East Germany who had long turned to western television for news and entertainment.<sup>65</sup>

From his arrival on June 23<sup>rd</sup> and his first remarks at the Bonn-Cologne airport, JFK was warmly received by the West German public. In Bonn, he addressed “hundreds of thousands of cheering Germans,” a *Washington Post* reporter observed, and pledged that the U.S. and its armed forces would remain in Germany to defend freedom.<sup>66</sup> At Frankfurt's historic Paulskirche JFK announced that “The purpose of our common military effort is not war but peace—not the destruction of nations but the protection of freedom.” And he added, “We work toward the day when there may be real peace between us and the Communists.”<sup>67</sup>

In Berlin, JFK spoke initially to a group of union construction workers, voicing his identification with their city by stating “West Berlin is my country.” After a motorcade through the city, he paused on the steps of the Schöneberger Rathaus, West Berlin's town hall, to deliver one of his most famous speeches to a crowd numbering in the hundreds of thousands.<sup>68</sup> The American President voiced in unmistakable terms his commitment to Berlin. For those who apologize for some elements of Communism or who excuse its excesses, he tells the audience, “Lass' sie nach Berlin kommen. Let them come to Berlin” to see for themselves. Standing not far from the Berlin Wall, he called the barrier “the most obvious and vivid demonstration of the failures of the Communist system.” JFK's most famous line came twice in the speech when he

---

ehemaligen Deutschen Demokratischen Republik (henceforth BStU), Berlin, Zentralarchiv, MfS, ZAIG, 4415, p. 1. I am very grateful to Dr. Erika Schwarz for locating these records.

<sup>64</sup> “10-Day Itinerary of Kennedy Tour,” and Tom Wicker, “A Busy Kennedy Schedule for Europe Is Announced,” NYT (June 19, 1963). “Appointment Book,” Wednesday, June 26, 1963, JFKL, [www.jfklibrary.org/jfk/modules/Diary](http://www.jfklibrary.org/jfk/modules/Diary). “Kennedy's Itinerary,” NYT (June 26, 1963). “Der Weg des Präsidenten durch Berlin,” *Tagesspiegel* (June 25, 1963)

<sup>65</sup> On the media coverage, see “Kennedy heute in Deutschland,” *Tagesspiegel* (June 23, 1963); and “Kennedys Berlin-Besuch im Fernsehen,” *Tagesspiegel* (June 26, 1963).

<sup>66</sup> Carroll Kilpatrick, “West Germans Hail Pledge by Kennedy,” WP (June 24, 1963). See also Tom Wicker, “Kennedy, in Bonn, Pledges to Keep Forces in Europe,” NYT (June 24, 1963).

<sup>67</sup> “266. Address in the Assembly Hall at the Paulskirche in Frankfurt, June 25, 1963,” *Public Papers of the Presidents, JFK, 1963*, 518, 520.

<sup>68</sup> “Acht Stunden eines großen Tages,” *Tagesspiegel* (June 27, 1963).

forcefully announced “Ich bin ein Berliner,” firmly linking all those committed to freedom, especially himself and America, to the city. Before leaving the city he gave another speech at the Free University, reaffirming once again “my country’s commitment to West Berlin’s freedom “ and restating “our confidence in its people and their courage.”<sup>69</sup>

In Berlin and in the other German cities, JFK told the audiences that this was a period of transition for the Atlantic alliance and that “new links must be found to hold it together,” a reporter in the *Washington Post* noted. “In every speech he makes he stresses the ties that link the free world in such a way that the security of one is the security of all,” thereby strengthening the unity of the alliance. JFK was in fact speaking to millions of Europeans, assuring them “that this is a new man in a new Europe, and while he pays tribute to the past he is looking to the future,” using “rhetorical juxtapositions” as he had done in a number of other addresses.<sup>70</sup> That was exactly the message they needed and wanted to hear.

The visit proved to have additional ramifications. Not to be out-done by the American President, Walther Ulbricht announced just two days before President Kennedy’s visit that Soviet Premier Khrushchev would later that week be in East Berlin to celebrate Ulbricht’s 70<sup>th</sup> birthday.<sup>71</sup> “Kennedy went to Berlin to hold up the trousers of the Social Democrats but nothing will come of it,” Khrushchev explained when he toured an East Berlin machine factory during his visit. “I have read that the President of the United States looked at the wall with dissatisfaction. He did not like it all, but me...I like it. It pleases me tremendously.”<sup>72</sup>

Khrushchev also blasted West German political leaders, the “revanchists,” for their unrelenting advocacy of a western presence in Berlin. The Soviet premier spoke to the public, numbering only several thousand at East Berlin’s Red City Hall, most of who were members of the Communist youth group. “The GDR is an inseparable part of the greater Socialist family,”

---

<sup>69</sup> “269. Remarks in the Rudolph Wilde Platz, Berlin. June 26, 1963;” and “271. Address at the Free University of Berlin. June 26, 1963,” *Public Papers of the Presidents, JFK, 1963*, 524-525, 527. See, Tom Wicker, “Berliners’ Welcome Filled With Emotion,” *NYT* (June 27, 1963). “Präsident Kennedy: ‘Ich bin ein Belriner’,” “Der Kennedy-Besuch im Spiegel der Reden,” and “‘Alle freien Menschen sind Bürger West-Berlin’,” *Tagesspiegel* (June 27, 1963). On the East German response to the Berlin visit see Robert G. Waite, “Ish bin ein Baerleener.” JFK’s June 26, 1963 Visit to Berlin: The Views from East Germany,” forthcoming, *Journal of Contemporary History*.

<sup>70</sup> Marquis Childs, “JFK’s Message In New Europe,” *WP* (June 26, 1963). Daum, *Kennedy in Berlin*, 162, 164-166. “Kennedy unterstreicht die Rolle der Bundesrepublik in Europa,” *TAGESSPIEGEL* (June 25, 1963). “Der Kennedy-Besuch im Spiegel der Reden,” *TAGESSPIEGEL* (June 27, 1963). Willy Brandt devotes an entire chapter to the Berlin visit, see *Begnungen mit Kennedy* (Munich: Kindler Verlag, 1964), 191-211.

<sup>71</sup> “Khrushchev Plans Trip to East Berlin to Honor Ulbricht,” *NYT* (June 24, 1963).

<sup>72</sup> “K Visits E. Berlin Friday, Advancing Trip 2 Days,” *WP* (June 26, 1963). Quoted in Katharine Clark, “K Again Denounces Kennedy’s Trip,” *WP* (June 30, 1963).

he explained. Facing a thunderstorm, Khrushchev halted the speech and drove through the city in a motorcade that observers insisted “compared in no way to triumphant procession of Kennedy’s through West Berlin.”<sup>73</sup>

The headline in the *Washington Post* read “K Berlin Visit Fails to Offset JFK Trip” and the article cited an Associated Press estimate that “not more than 250,000 in all saw Khrushchev” compared to an estimated 1.4 million who turned out for the American President in West Berlin. Khrushchev made a few pointed remarks aimed at the JFK visit, accusing the President of saying that he wanted to “normalize relations but his actions are such as to bring about just opposite,” as he contrasted the June 10<sup>th</sup> address at American University and JFK’s recent comments in West Berlin.<sup>74</sup> The view of Khrushchev’s visit from East Berlin differed, and the East German secret police, the Stasi, reported that the West had tried to “play down” the visit with the typical “inflammatory arguments.” For example, the western press wrote that the GDR and “especially” Ulbricht needed bolstering because of the growing “domestic insecurity.” And the Stasi noted, Khrushchev was “in the driver’s seat” on the Berlin question and “he could ratchet up the pressure at any moment if he had wanted to dampen the significance of Kennedy’s visit.”<sup>75</sup>

Following the visits of Kennedy and Khrushchev to Berlin, tensions over the divided city mounted. The East Germans viewed, for example, “the numerous” state-sponsored visits to West Berlin and the related events as “provocations.”<sup>76</sup> During the fall incidents along the Wall or on the access routes to Berlin mounted. In early October, for example, East German border guards “provoked” a brief confrontation on two occasions when they “hurled stones at United States military police patrols” in Berlin. The Americans responded with tear gas and smoke grenades.<sup>77</sup> A more serious confrontation came on October 11<sup>th</sup> when Soviet forces blocked a US convoy on the Autobahn, the main highway link with West Germany. The convoy was stopped early in its journey and then later at the border of Berlin. Soviet guards demanded that the Americans leave their vehicles to be counted, a clear violation of post-war agreements. The US troops refused and the stand-off prompted high-level discussions among the Allied commanders in West Berlin. Additional US reinforcements went to the scene and after 15 hours of often heated argument the Soviets relented. The incident received considerable attention and led one columnist to write that after an apparent easing of tensions between the super powers that the Soviets would adopt “provocative” behavior to “set back the cause of detente.” Clearly

---

<sup>73</sup> “Chruschtschow in Ost-Berlin,” and “Unsere Meinung: Chruschtschows Ankunft,” *Tagesspiegel* (June 29, 1963).

<sup>74</sup> Katharine Clar, “K Berlin Visit Fails To Offset JFK Trip,” WP (June 29, 1963. See also Arthur J. Olsen, “Khrushchev Opens East Berlin Visit; Welcome Is Mild,” NYT (June 29, 1963).

<sup>75</sup> “Wochenbericht über feindliche Manöver, Absichten und Maßnahmen gegen die DDR (vom 17.6.-29.6.63),” BStU, Zentralarchiv, MfS, ZAIG, 4415, 13.

<sup>76</sup> “Wochenbericht...17.6.-29.6.1963, 24.

<sup>77</sup> “U.S. Bolsters Berlin Patrol After East German Stoning,” NYT (October 4, 1963).

exacerbated, he added, “The stupidity of it all—even from a Soviet point of view—seems so apparent.” The smoothing of relations, the easing of tensions, had suffered a major setback.<sup>78</sup> Little was to change through late November 1963.

Berlin, both West and East, was deeply affected by the assassination of President Kennedy. The first reports came in radio and television news broadcasts.<sup>79</sup> The headlines of all the city’s major newspapers carried news of the events in Dallas. In East Berlin, Walter Ulbricht stated that “we have received the news of the treacherous assassination...with sadness and deep indignation.”<sup>80</sup> West Berlin’s newspapers carried on the front page the details as they became known, including the most recent press reports from Dallas. The headline in *Der Tagesspiegel* on November 23<sup>rd</sup> read “President Kennedy Murdered by Assassin” and next to it was a large photograph of JFK. Willy Brandt told the press that “a flame has been extinguished for all humanity that hoped for a just peace and a better life.” And he added, “The world is this evening much poorer.”<sup>81</sup> Brandt made a radio announcement of the assassination to the people of Berlin. Spontaneous outpourings of emotion followed immediately. Theaters halted their productions and television programming was interrupted. Residents of West Berlin put candles in their windows and many poured onto the streets. Some 20,000 students marched in a show of grief and mourning through the streets to the Rudolph-Wilde-Platz, assembling in front of the Schöneberg town hall, the site of JFK’s famous speech. More than 50,000 Berliners soon gathered there. Throughout the night, more people came, carrying candles to show their deep and profound grief. The Berlin city government called for residents to assemble the next day, Sunday, November 25<sup>th</sup>, for a memorial service. In fact, the entire Federal Republic “stood in shock and sadness” because of the assassination.<sup>82</sup>

The East Berlin media voiced its sympathy, too. “The world grieves with the American people,” a columnist wrote in the *Berliner Zeitung*. “It has lost a first-rate statesman.” Reaction throughout the country was “overwhelming... [and] the people expressed their deepest sympathy at the murder of Kennedy,” a report to the Central Committee stated. While expressing the deepest sympathy of the leaders of the German Democratic Republic, they blamed the shooting on “right wing extremists” in the American south, and he called Texas “a center of racial terror and repression of Negroes.” East Germans saw the assassination as an act of vengeance by the

---

<sup>78</sup> “Count of Convoy’s Troops Is Demanded by Russians;” “Russians Yield, Let U.S. Convoy Pass Into Berlin;” and “Confrontation at Berlin,” NYT (October 13, 1963)

<sup>79</sup> “Tageschau. Meldung...Attentat auf den amerikanischen Präsidenten John F. Kennedy,” November 22, 1963, Deutsches Rundfunkarchiv (Potsdam-Babelsberg), DRA, FfnB6441330.

<sup>80</sup> “Beileid Walter Ulbrichts,” *Berliner Zeitung* (November 23, 1963).

<sup>81</sup> “Präsident Kennedy von Attentäter ermordet,” and “Brandt: Eine Flamme ist erloschen,” TAGESSPIEGEL (November 23, 1963). Daum, *Kennedy in Berlin*, 167, 174.

<sup>82</sup> “Fackelzug der Berliner Studenten,” “Das nächtliche Gedenken der Berliner Jugend,” “Trauerkundgebung für Kennedy,” and “Erschütterung in der Bundesrepublik,” *Tagesspiegel* (November 24, 1963).

“ultras,” by “right-wing extremists” who vehemently opposed JFK’s domestic policies.<sup>83</sup>

In conclusion, from 1958 through November 1963, the situation of Berlin, its status in the post-war settlement, was the source of on-going tensions that threatened to lead to nuclear war between the Soviet Union and the western allies. When JFK took office, it was one of the first issues that he had to face and the Berlin crisis flared up periodically during the years of his presidency. Berlin was, however, but one of a number of hot-spots around the globe where communism threatened the West.<sup>84</sup>

JFK’s handling of the on-going Berlin crises offers a case study of presidential speech-writing, rhetoric, leadership, and art of diplomacy. While the newly elected President reacted to pressures, demands, provocations, and outrageous behavior on the part of Nikita Khrushchev and Walter Ulbricht, JFK defined and framed the discussion of each crisis. Through his position as President of the most powerful nation, John Kennedy molded public opinion in the US and he gained public support by presenting each major incident as a genuine crisis provoked by the aggressive Communists. His visit to Berlin electrified the western world. It was through speeches, television broadcasts projecting urgency, and the media that JFK was largely able to shape the debate, the perception of the crisis in the U.S. and Germany. With his highly skillful rhetoric, crafted by him and speech writer Theodore Sorensen, JFK rallied public opinion and strengthened his position.

The importance of the spoken word in the Kennedy administration was enormous. As Theodore Sorensen explained in a 1963 lecture at Columbia University, the president had the task “to lead public opinion as well as respect it - to shape it, to inform it, to woo it, and win it.” In foreign affairs, “the issues are frequently so complex, the facts so obscure, and the period for decision so short, that the American people have from the beginning - and even more so in this century delegated to the President more discretion in this vital area; and they are usually willing to support any reasonable decision he makes.” JFK did that brilliantly, as he summed up in his public addresses the on-going crisis as a struggle between the champions of freedom and forces of oppression. The American President also captured public opinion in Germany and especially Berlin where his words and his presence had a far-reaching and enduring impact.<sup>85</sup>

To his credit and vision, JFK insisted during the various crises that the US should “lean forward” on negotiations and not shy from direct talks with Khrushchev. The US had to enter

---

<sup>83</sup> “Peter Baranowsky, “Der Mord an Kennedy,” *Berliner Zeitung* (November 24, 1963). “Erste Information über Diskussionen zur Ermordung Kennedys,” Abteilung Organisation Gruppe Parteiorganisation und - Information, Berlin, November 29, 1963, Bundesarchiv, Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR, DY/30/IVA2/9.02, Nr. 91. See “Mordschüsse der Rechtsextremisten,” *BERLINER ZEITUNG* (November 23, 1963).

<sup>84</sup> “Issues at Vienna.”

<sup>85</sup> Theodore Sorensen, *Decision Making in the White House: The Olive Branch or the Arrows* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1963), pp. 46, 48.

these from positions of strength and determination.<sup>86</sup> Furthermore, JFK recognized the importance of personal politics, of his ability to use his charm and his intellect to craft the confrontations in terms that were not only readily comprehended by the public in the U.S. and Germany but which also shaped fundamentals of the discussion. He was, however, not always successful, especially when dealing with the Soviets over Berlin. Nevertheless, when planning the June 1963 trip he and his advisors recognized that by his presence in several German cities, especially Berlin, and that by visiting the divided city, even for less than a single day, he would send a powerful message. The President was right. His Berlin visit electrified the city, stunned the East, and went far in bolstering the Western alliance. The reception given to him by the West Berliners provided all the justification he needed. The impact of the visit reverberated for years to come and it continues to be viewed as one of the finer moments, one of the few bright spots, in the Cold War. The reporting of his assassination in newspapers throughout the divided Germany reveal how very effective his personal style of politics and his rhetoric had been in reaching leaders and citizens on both sides of the Berlin Wall.

---

<sup>86</sup> Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 590.