

JOHN F. KENNEDY AND BERLIN: FROM THE WALL TO THE 1963 VISIT

Symposium at the Goethe Institute Inter Nationes, Washington D.C., May 8, 2002. Conveners: Werner Ott/Sylvia Blume (Goethe Institute/Inter Nationes), Christof Mauch/Bernd Schäfer (GHI), Gerhard Groß/Wolfram Hoppenstedt (Bundeskanzler-Willy-Brandt-Stiftung, Berlin). Speaker: Egon Bahr (Bonn).

The question, or more correctly, the permanent crisis surrounding the city of Berlin played a central role in John F. Kennedy's short presidency, all the way from the 1961 building of the wall to his triumphant 1963 visit. Commemorating the latter in the lead-up to its upcoming fortieth anniversary, the Goethe Institute in Washington put on display the photo exhibit "JFK in Germany" from April 2 to May 31, 2002. In conjunction with the Goethe Institute, the GHI and the Chancellor Willy Brandt Foundation (Berlin) organized a public discussion with Egon Bahr on May 8.

During the cold war tensions in the decisive early 1960s, Egon Bahr, the later architect of West Germany's *Ostpolitik*, was Press Secretary and a close confidant of West Berlin's mayor Willy Brandt in the city hall of Berlin-Schöneberg. Welcomed by Werner Ott (Goethe Institute), Christof Mauch (GHI) and Gerhard Groß (Willy Brandt Foundation) and moderated by Bernd Schäfer (GHI), Egon Bahr related his experiences with Kennedy and U.S. foreign policy to a large and highly attentive audience in the Goethe Institut.

In a captivating narrative Bahr laid out the dramatic unfolding of events in Berlin between August 12–20, 1961 from the perspective of Willy Brandt and his advisers. Bahr focused on the German perception of American reactions to the encircling of West Berlin by a barbed wire fence, which was to be replaced three days later by the construction of a concrete wall. Describing the astonishment of the West Berliners, including their political leadership, about the seeming passivity and equanimity of President John F. Kennedy in the face of this East German answer to the refugee stream into West Berlin, Bahr prepared the ground for his explanation of how West Germans had to come to terms with the *realpolitik* of the superpowers.

In fact, this prevalent cold war pattern was a self-protecting mechanism to avert a "hot war," which would inevitably have gone nuclear on a battlefield like Europe. The Germans in West and East, as well as informed politicians like Brandt and Bahr, were apparently not aware how dangerous the "Second Berlin Crisis," instigated by the GDR and the Soviet Union in 1958, had become by mid-1961. The meaning of John F. Kennedy's sigh of relief, "a wall is a hell of a lot better than a war," entered West German minds with considerable delay, if at all.

From Willy Brandt's fury after his return from the Western Allies' Berlin headquarters ("they are all cowards"), to the West Berliners barely getting used to the permanence of a fortified border towards East Berlin and the GDR, to the visit of U.S. Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson handing over a letter from President Kennedy and asking where to buy Brandt's slippers, Bahr depicted, in sometimes drastic terms, the story of how West German politicians learned a stern lesson: The major nuclear powers were not willing to risk a confrontation over German reunification. What is more, for an indefinite period, they regarded the division of Germany as an element of stability in Europe as long as ideological tensions and an arms race between the U.S.S.R and the U.S. persisted.

In order to overcome German division in the long run, West Germans had to take initiatives of their own to promote accommodation with Moscow and Eastern Europe and at the same time lay the foundations for gradual changes within the Eastern bloc to make borders more transparent. In his narrative, Egon Bahr subsequently portrayed the lessons from this week in August 1961 as the tentative beginning of what would two years later evolve into *Ostpolitik* inspired by his own "change through rapprochement" speech in Tutzing in 1963. During this process Kennedy and his administration, for both of whom Egon Bahr had high praise, supported prospective European leaders like Willy Brandt. In order to change the stalemate of the status quo in Europe and tackle the "German question," the Germans themselves had to adapt to realpolitik. This meant nothing less than to accept the status quo for the time being and to strive peacefully to modify it in the distant future.

In his remarks, Egon Bahr anecdotically confirmed the contemporary notion of a striking connection between the personalities of the U.S. President and West Berlin's mayor, culminating in Kennedy's triumphant visit to West Berlin in June 1963. From his personal perspective, Bahr described the relationship with the Kennedy administration as the best that a West German government ever had with a Washington government led by Democrats. Usually Bonn governments got along better with Republicans, Bahr opined, citing his close and confidential exchanges with Henry Kissinger and his staff after 1969. Quite in contrast to the years 1961–1963, however, Brandt's and Bahr's appreciation for Washington was, to put it mildly, not met with reciprocity by President Richard Nixon.

Egon Bahr's sometimes stunning and always lively presentation on the formative period of post-1961 American-German relations was received with great applause. A reception followed where many old friends from Washington were eager to meet the German politician, who had truly shaped German history and German-American relations over the course of his political career – and, besides, had just turned 80 in April 2002.

Bernd Schäfer