

‘Kennedy at the line in the sand’, from Süddeutsche Zeitung

Caption: On 27 June 1963, commenting on the visit of US President, John F. Kennedy, to West Berlin the previous day, the German daily newspaper Süddeutsche Zeitung considers the German question and the division of Berlin.

Source: Süddeutsche Zeitung. Münchner Neueste Nachrichten aus Politik, Kultur, Wirtschaft und Sport. Hrsg. Dürrmeier, Hans ; Herausgeber Proebst, Hermann. 27.06.1963, Nr. 153; 19. Jg. München: Süddeutscher Verlag. "Kennedy am Kreidestrich", auteur:Schuster, Hans , p. 1; 2.

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Kennedy at the line in the sand

By Hans Schuster

Millions of eyewitnesses from far and near will never forget the image: the President of the United States at the Wall which has become a symbol of sorrow throughout the world — opposite him the Brandenburg Gate, draped with red flags by nervous guards. The inherent qualities of the two worlds which abut one another here in the heart of Germany could not be demonstrated more clearly. On one side: confidence — newly won after many vicissitudes — in the moral and ultimately also political superiority of freedom; on the other: fear of the ungovernable freedom virus which, amongst other things, also has the ability to pass unchecked through prohibited zones, walls and barriers. On this day in Berlin, 26 June 1963, 15 years after the launch of the Berlin Airlift, it became clear: the mere fact that John F. Kennedy had come to Berlin against the advice of so many was a political event of the highest order, the centrepiece of this tour of Europe.

If a popular demonstration and wild jubilation can constitute a plebiscite, then the Berliners have cast a political vote which cannot go unheard. In front of the Schöneberg Town Hall, Kennedy reminded advocates of a quiet life throughout the world that, alongside the realities of tyranny, there is that other reality: confidence in the rule of liberty. Perhaps those who advised Kennedy to be extremely cautious in his utterances may have recoiled when, a few days after his peace speech, the President declared in Berlin to those who said ‘we can work with the Communists’: *Let them come to Berlin*. Is this the voice of bitter experience, after long and patient attempts to find a way forward? And then that other cry: when the day of freedom ‘finally comes, as it will, the people of West Berlin can take sober satisfaction in the fact that they were in the front line for almost *two decades*.’ No one will mistake the President for a prophet of early reunification. Something else rings out from Kennedy’s phrases, something that no Khrushchev can fail to hear: no word of military might; no reference to impressive production figures, no threats, no trumpeting of material power. The other side could do all that just as well. But one thing it cannot do: trust in the all-pervasive and regulating power of liberty.

Anyone failing to detect in Kennedy’s statements in Bonn, Frankfurt or Berlin any concrete political references going beyond maintenance of the status quo might say: this President, for sound reasons, is staying behind the line in the sand at the sector boundary. He knows where the limits to power lie in the prevailing balance of power. But, after everything that he has said about the fundamental values of *self-determination* and *freedom of choice*, he will never take the step of legally recognising the East German regime, not even in the form of mutual non-aggression declarations, as recently mooted by Moscow — albeit without any reference to a resolution of the Berlin question.

While the current situation of Berlin is indeed better than it was two years ago, and while significant new moves are discernible there, particularly in the cultural field, this is due in no small part to the implacable seriousness with which Kennedy insists on the *vital interests* of the Western Powers in Berlin. Of course, the belief that Berlin formed part of the Federal Republic of Germany never directly constituted one of these *essentials*; it is, however, all the more significant that both Willy Brandt and Konrad Adenauer, at the President’s side, could now speak of Berlin with the utmost confidence and emphasis as *part of the Federal Republic*. On this point, too, there were no petty rivalries between Adenauer and Brandt over protocol. Although the Federal Minister, Ludwig Erhard, and the Prime Minister of Berlin, Georg August Zinn, may have jokingly told the President that the people lining the street belonged to *their* party, it is as well that Kennedy did not notice any such distinction and saw only the *joy* manifest in them ...

Anyone who now, before the impending showdown between Moscow and Peking, expects separate initiatives on the German or Berlin question fails to appreciate the inappropriateness of the moment for such political operations. For fifteen years, there have been repeated opportunities for initiatives. At present, in the calm before a possible storm, it makes more sense to wait and see and to respond to developments in world politics as necessary. It was assumed from the outset that the question of the East–West conflict would not be in the forefront of Kennedy’s visit to Europe, but rather concern for his *grand design*, for the Atlantic Partnership. Economic cooperation, consolidation of NATO and multilateral armed forces were the

main focus of interest for Kennedy. Only when Franco–US relations have been put back on to a sounder footing and when it becomes clearer on the other side of the Iron Curtain what conclusions Khrushchev will draw from the ideological dispute with Peking will the time have come to find a new common approach to policy on Germany.

Khrushchev's visit to East Berlin, only 48 hours after Kennedy's triumphal progress through West Berlin, showed hardly less vividly than the President's face-to-face with the Brandenburg Gate how precarious is the present silence between the world powers. Of course, the line in the sand applies not only to the President, it also applies to the First Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party when he tries tomorrow to match Berlin's surge of enthusiasm for Kennedy in his own person. But what is developing in the present period of 'calm'?

Many expect, in the long term, a growing realisation on the part of the Soviet leadership of the need to recognise Europe and Germany as a political force in its own right. They already regard the offensive launched in 1958 over the Berlin and German question as a spent force. It would be more correct to focus on what is already discernible: on the recent endorsement of Ulbricht's policy by Khrushchev, at a time when the boss of the Socialist Unity Party has just promulgated a whole string of measures resulting in an exacerbation of the situation, from the prohibited zone order, which is also directed against Allied rights, to the obstruction of the Evangelical Synod in East Berlin. This may amount to a series of probing acts designed to test Western reaction to the political incorporation of East Berlin into the German Democratic Republic. To judge by the lack of protest, the Western Powers could, on this question as in the matter of the erection of the Wall, content themselves with the long-term defence of the *essentials* in West Berlin: presence of the Allies, freedom of access to and viability of the city. Let us not speak of a calm before the storm, therefore, but rather let us set about the task of building up new, more hopeful positions on this side of the line in the sand.

Kennedy said he was not promising that freedom would come easily and made no empty promises. That must also mean that we should be less impatient but could show more self-confidence. And the President has set one other example for the conduct of Western policy towards the East *in practice*: non-doctrinaire openness to all possibilities in no way conflicts with the great dream of freedom, and it has nothing to do with acquiescence.