III. The United States and German Reunification after 1961: Kennedy's Experimentation with Inherited Policies in the Berlin Crisis, 1961–62

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III. THE UNITED STATES AND GERMAN REUNIFICATION—1961–63

*Kennedy's Experimentation with Inherited Policies in the Berlin Crisis, 1961–62*

The Kennedy administration was committed to a policy of arms control in the broad sense of designing coherent policies to stabilize the essentially bipolar balance of power. This entailed efforts to achieve a more flexible and controlled defense posture for the Western world and to establish better communications with the Communist world. The goal was, at a minimum, to prevent miscalculation leading to war in the continuing cold war struggle; at a maximum, to reach agreements beginning in the military realm to go beyond hostile coexistence to peaceful cooperation. The program proved itself insufficiently attuned to the European environment. America’s allies resisted the troop increases that the new strategy demanded, while the efforts to prevent the growth of additional centers of nuclear power dismayed proponents of a NATO nuclear force and French policy-makers alike. The prospective Russian partner was less interested in sophisticated theories of arms control at the strategic level than in the burning political issues centering on Germany. Rumblings over Berlin were heard very early in 1961, and Kennedy’s Vienna meeting with Khrushchev announced the real beginning of long and laborious efforts to apply a broad and bipolar strategy for East-West relations to a complicated European crisis involving the interests of several powers.
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The Kennedy administration's response to the new Russian threat of a separate peace treaty with Ulbricht to end allied rights in Berlin was different from that of its predecessor, both militarily and diplomatically. To avoid miscalculation of Western determination and to augment the applicable military force available in Europe, Kennedy ordered an ostentatious execution of long-planned force build-ups during the 1961 crisis. Although Kennedy declined to declare a national emergency and institute general mobilization, this course contrasted directly with America's reluctance in 1958, when faced with a similar ultimatum, to bolster local or strategic forces.

Negotiations with the Russians were sought not so much because they were an unavoidable means of publicizing Soviet intransigence over Germany—Kennedy considered reunification an "unrealistic" objective—but because a willingness to talk would prevent the crisis from going completely out of control and give America a chance to place issues other than Khrushchev's bellicose demands on the agenda.

On possible responses to the building of the Berlin wall, there was no significant cleavage of allied opinion; some Soviet action to stop the flow of refugees was anticipated, almost welcomed as a step to cool down the crisis. Since it is clear that every aspect of the allied position in Berlin is only more or less militarily untenable, this decision was based less on a judgment of the infeasibility of vigorous counteraction than on the argument that the wall was essentially a defensive action to shore up a vital sphere of Soviet influence. All Western pronouncements (and contingency plans) dealt with possible threats to West Berlin (i.e., another blockade), in
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an effort to make crystal clear the extent of allied determination. From Germany's standpoint this was a regrettable necessity for, by concentrating on West Berlin, the alliance seemed to grant the Soviet Union a free hand to abrogate unilaterally other aspects of four-power responsibility for the whole city. In the course of making the commitment clear, it was also necessary to make it limited, and this had no doubt eased the Soviet decision to seal off their sector.

After the wall, there continued the delicate and dangerous task of resisting further Soviet encroachments on allied force movements to and within the city, while a heated Western debate on negotiations proceeded, somewhat independently. Intent on overcoming what it considered the traditional rigidity of Western proposals for Europe, the Kennedy government pressed hard for the early development of a negotiating position for a four-power conference and, when faced with persistent disunity, gradually decided to seek exploratory talks with the Soviets, even without allied participation. Eisenhower had welcomed the Camp David session as a low pressure respite from the pace of Big Four diplomacy; Kennedy sought out bilateral talks as a necessary means of speeding it up.

Throughout, the British were wholehearted proponents of one-half of America's strategy; they welcomed every effort to arrive at a new agreement on Berlin, whether coupled with wider disarmament and security measures or not, while resisting calls for a military build-up on the grounds that it might contribute to war panic or ruin the chances for successful talks. At the opposite pole were the French, even more adamantly opposed than in 1959 to ne-
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gotiations under pressure, for reasons reviewed below. Since none of the allies added significantly to the build-up of American forces backing the diplomatic effort, the French abstention in the diplomatic realm was a greater hindrance to Kennedy's course than was Britain's in the military.

Between these extremes lay West Germany, unable to endorse the British zeal for almost any sort of interim Berlin arrangement, but equally unable to side with the French. Because bilateral discussions on issues vital to it were inevitable, the Federal Republic, to be heard at all, had to make its influence felt through the American position.

Bonn failed from the start to convince the Anglo-American powers to use a modified version of the Herter plan as a basis for four-power talks. For Kennedy, the relevant German question had become the matter of new guarantees for West Berlin, in return for which he was willing to explore ways of making continuation of Western presence and access rights more palatable to the Soviets. Concretely, this meant that such questions as an acceptance of the Oder-Neisse line, a withdrawal of nuclear weapons from the Bundeswehr, the use of East German personnel in checking allied traffic, the possible conversion of Berlin into a U.N.-controlled entity, and even a measure of disengagement in Central Europe were considered. West Germany's reaction at this juncture was to recall the principle that progress toward European security and disarmament had to be linked with progress toward a solution of the whole German problem. Here Bonn had some success, for, after the first round of exploratory bilateral talks in the fall of 1961, America dissociated
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itself clearly from notions like the Rapacki plan or disengagement.

Still the Adenauer government feared the worst, a far-reaching great-power accord on Central Europe, and stressed on every occasion during that winter that further talks should be limited to Berlin alone, while adducing all available arguments against the necessity of negotiating a new status for the city that would dilute the concept of four-power responsibility and enhance East Germany’s position. The situation had deteriorated considerably since 1959, when Bonn thought it might be possible to direct attention away from European matters entirely onto the topic of general disarmament.

Ultimately it became clear that Kennedy was still willing to bargain security measures for Berlin guarantees. The proposed American package of April, 1962, reportedly leaked by Bonn to diminish the prospect of Russian acceptance, contained, in addition to an international access authority giving East Germany and East Berlin equal status with their Western counterparts, the idea of a NATO-WTO nonaggression pact long rejected by the West for political reasons, and a U.S.-U.S.S.R. nonproliferation agreement indicating the priority of great-power concerns over the need for nuclear sharing in NATO. It also called for inter-German committees, but these were not to function under a four-power commission on reunification, as the German government had proposed in the past.

In short, Bonn was faced with the collapse of American support for practically all its major premises on East-West agreements. Only zonal disarmament was ever clearly excluded from the exploratory
talks. Other proposals kept reappearing without firm association with reunification. That no agreement emerged from the year of intensive off-and-on bilateral discussions was more a result of the rather surprising Russian unwillingness to consider any text at all conceding a Western presence in Berlin than of de Gaulle’s intransigence and of West Germany’s ambivalence, bordering frequently on outright opposition to the whole endeavor. Kennedy’s guiding conviction of the crucial responsibility of the superpowers to preserve world peace caused him to ride roughshod over allied discontent and to ignore provocative Soviet harassment in Berlin while seeking all possible ways to achieve a stabler modus vivendi in Europe. He was not averse to reconsidering suggestions originating in Soviet proposals of the 1950’s or to subordinating the legalities of the Berlin position to what he considered its substance. In the end, he had the opportunity to convince himself fully that the Russians were unready for any “normalization” in Europe that was not wholly on their terms. The experience, rather than killing all of Kennedy’s hopes for significant East-West agreements, only led him to prepare more carefully the climate and agenda for the next major period of discussions in 1963.

In view of these departures from past policy, it is important to ask how Kennedy’s over-all conception of the German problem differed from other leading Western statesmen. In terms of declared goals, Kennedy fully endorsed the basic West German thesis that genuine European stability depended on the achievement of reunification through self-determination. In private, too, he judged the importance of the Berlin crisis in terms worthy of Adenauer or
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Dulles at their most pessimistic. Speaking to President Kekonnen of Finland in October, 1961, he said that Soviet policy in Berlin

...is designed to neutralize West Germany as a first step in the neutralization of Western Europe. That is what makes the present situation so dangerous. West Germany is the key as to whether Western Europe will be free.... It is not that we wish to stand on the letter of the law or that we underestimate the dangers of war. But if we don't meet our commitments in Berlin, it will mean the destruction of NATO and a dangerous situation for the whole world. All Europe is at stake in West Berlin.8

Moreover, he was as sensitive as Dulles to the fact that the lever for the implementation of these unlimited Soviet goals was the mood in the Federal Republic:

We do not want to spread that state of melancholy [occasioned in West Germany by the erection of the Wall] by legitimizing the East German regime and stimulating a nationalist revival in West Germany.... Germany has been divided for sixteen years and will continue to stay divided. The Soviet Union is running an unnecessary risk in trying to change this from an accepted fact into a legal state. Let the Soviet Union keep Germany divided on its present basis and not try to persuade us to associate ourselves legally with the division and thus weaken our ties to West Germany and their ties to Western Europe.9

The difference in Kennedy's position is clear, for half of his remarks would justify a rigid adherence to past positions, admitting of no need to negotiate, with the maintenance of West German confidence

9 Ibid., pp. 398–99.
the prime concern; but in the other half, he felt compelled to admit that the division would obviously continue, barring a radical shift in Soviet policy, and that he hoped to defuse the unsatisfactory situation as much as possible. In this endeavor he was prepared, as we have seen, to dispense with certain legalities and priorities, in partial disregard of that “state of melancholy” in the Federal Republic that he so clearly judged to be the real danger. Détente, in the sense of achieving a minimum understanding with the Soviets not to slide into war, conflicted with the goal of preserving West Germany as the linchpin of the alliance.

In 1961, the search for a superpower agreement unquestionably had priority over concern for allied unity to a degree unprecedented in the 1950’s. This was never more strikingly evident than in an interview Kennedy gave to Izvestia in November, only three days after consultation with Adenauer over how the Berlin talks should proceed. Despite reference to fulfillment of the 1955 Directives as the “soundest policy,” Kennedy argued that in view of the Soviet refusal to permit reunification, a new international agreement regulating access to West Berlin would produce “peace in this area for years.” Then, in the context of refuting Soviet propaganda about the danger of West German revanchism, he stated:

... as long as German forces are integrated in NATO... there is security for all.... Now, if this situation changed, if Germany developed an atomic capability of its own, if it developed missiles or a strong national army that threatened war, then I would understand your concern, and I would share it.... If it changed, then it would seem to me
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appropriate for the United States and the Soviet Union and others to consider the situation at that time.10

These remarks indicated that behind the American pressure for a more flexible negotiating stance that seemed to Bonn at best a recipe for the gradual recognition of the status quo was a general tendency to write off publicly any hopes for unity in the foreseeable future, coupled with acknowledgments, however hypothetical, of the overlapping interests of the great powers in controlling West Germany. Together with the specific course of the long talks over Berlin, they constituted a full-scale challenge to the ingrained premises of the Federal Republic's foreign policy. De Gaulle would speak as bluntly a few years later.

Kennedy's Counteroffensive in East-West Relations, 1963

The course and rationale of Kennedy's steps to reopen a dialogue with the Soviet Union after Cuba are well-known; this account shall focus on the European aspects of the mood of détente that reigned in 1963. Basically, American policy avoided raising the controversial political issues that had plagued the Berlin talks and concentrated on a series of inspection and communication measures designed to lessen the danger of war by surprise attack or miscalculation. In contrast to the 1957 talks, no specific

zonal proposals were formulated; the efforts at Geneva were to a certain degree carried out just to educate the Soviets in more sophisticated matters of arms control, to gain their acceptance of the principle of “inspection without disarmament.”

Apart from these talks seeking a starting point for agreements in Europe midway between the Russian call for simple disarmament and the Western formula linking military and political steps, Western policy on “Europeanizing” the détente was largely defensive. Steadfastly rejected were Communist calls for the Rapacki plan and troop cuts in Europe, as were proposals linking ground observation posts with denuclearization in Central Europe. Khrushchev’s attempt to tie the test ban to a NATO-WTO nonaggression pact failed as well, since Kennedy and his advisers had become aware of the destabilizing effects of proceeding too quickly in the bilateral search for détente over the heads of the allies.

Thus, when America, with the British in tandem, sought to maintain the much-vaunted “momentum” generated at Moscow, there was little prospect for a return to the traditional Western agenda for Europe. Although the Russians clearly were interested in resuming talks on Berlin and disarmament in Europe, the Americans stressed such issues as observation posts, underground testing, nonproliferation, the production of fissionable materials and, as a priority matter, the peaceful uses of space. Kennedy’s strategy was to explore areas of agreement, sufficiently remote from allied interests and the complicated political map of Europe, where superpower cooperation could be practiced and extended. The hope was that success in so-called peripheral or universal measures could create an atmosphere more
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conducive to a return to the center of the military and political confrontation.

In relating this long-range strategy for détente to the problem of divided Germany, administration spokesmen emphasized that the only sensible course was to accept the division as an enforced reality, which only war could undo, and encourage increased contacts with the eastern zone to better the lot and maintain the hopes of those denied their political rights by the Soviet system. West Berlin and West Germany would serve as a daily demonstration that the Western way of life combined the elemental democratic freedoms with economic well-being. Ultimately, if Germany and the rest of Europe made common cause with the United States in evolving an Atlantic Partnership with close ties to the third world, the day would come when the Soviet leaders would realize the impossibility and danger of upholding their pretensions to world domination, and the policy of keeping Germany divided against its will would become unnecessary. At that juncture, a strong and united West would be able to negotiate the economic adjustments and arms agreements attending a reunification settlement.

This was the design, global and long-term. Beyond the most general references to working constructively with the forces of nationalism and liberalization in the Communist bloc, and the assumption that in time East Germany would become a "wasting asset" to Soviet rulers, it contained no hint of initiatives, or the need for them, on reunification. Kennedy's feeling after the Berlin and post-Cuba talks with the Soviets was that while no agreement remotely satisfactory was possible, none was really even necessary, since the situation was finally stable
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if admittedly imperfect. Remarks from early 1963 tellingly attest to this frame of mind. Apropos of the Multi-lateral Force (MLF), Kennedy said, “The whole debate about an atomic force in Europe is really useless, because Berlin is secure, the Europe as a whole is well protected. What really matters at this point is the rest of the world.” Still, he was prepared to let that debate continue, if only to provide the West Germans with an alternative to Gaullism, while conceding that de Gaulle’s policy, as exemplified in the Franco-German treaty, was only another means toward the American end of tying “Germany more firmly into the structure of Western Europe.”

Hence the over-all strategy for East-West relations was accompanied by efforts to keep the Federal Republic a satisfied and contributing member of the Western community in the tasks of maintaining the common defense and establishing a new pattern of relations with the underdeveloped world.

Confronted with this broad and loosely-linked American program for the future, the Federal Republic set about to ensure that its views on the several areas of policy relating to the major concern of reunification were clearly heard. In many ways, this inaugurated the most interesting and fruitful period of adjustment and initiative in Bonn’s foreign policy that has been here surveyed, coming as it did in a period of relative relaxation and involving the whole spectrum of issues.

Bonn reiterated the crucial semantic distinction whereby the period was characterized not as one of détente but rather as one of diplomatic soundings to

see whether a genuine will to effect a détente actually existed; as always, the acid test was whether the shift in Soviet tactics signified a readiness for agreement in Germany or Berlin that did not create new sources of tension by perpetuating the old and fundamental one of Germany’s division. Even in the absence of direct progress on the German question, however, Bonn endorsed the Anglo-Americans’ efforts on the periphery, such as the nuclear test ban, and indicated that Germany would consider partial measures in the area of European security or arms control which might be advantageous to the alliance. Adherence to a strict formula was not asked, but two guidelines were suggested: The measure must not entail recognition of East Germany, and the more the current military balance in Europe is altered, the greater would be the requirement for progress toward political solutions. By these standards, a nonaggression pact was excluded, except at the end of a reunification settlement, whereas ground observation posts were acceptable as a separate agreement, provided the system was not limited to German territory alone or tied to a thinning-out or denuclearization of Central Europe.

A more flexible formula for arms control agreements was complemented by government pronouncements, beginning in 1962, to the effect that mitigating the human consequences of the German division was more urgent than overcoming it politically. Generally, this was expressed in formulations in which Bonn announced it would consider certain sacrifices, financial among them, if the Soviets would grant the East German population greater political freedom. In terms of concrete policy, an ambitious offer by Adenauer of a ten-year civil peace ending in reuni-
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...lication went unnoticed by the Soviets, and the principle found its real application subsequently in the more modest efforts to open the Berlin wall for West German visits.

On the broader question of political contacts with Eastern Europe, Foreign Minister Schroeder’s much publicized steps to open trade missions with Moscow’s allies were a further sign of Bonn’s readiness to modify past policies for the period of more active East-West diplomacy that was apparently opening up after the missile crisis and Kennedy’s elaboration of a more considered strategy for regulating continuing competition with the Soviet Union. And yet these several indicators of a “policy of movement,” so welcome in the West, were never considered in Bonn to be more than a logical complement to continued Western unity and action on reunification. Schroeder himself was emphatic that German policy must probe constantly for openings in the Soviet position, constantly confronting the Kremlin with positive requests for change. Any less active course would entail the danger of allowing people to become accustomed to the division, gradually transforming the status quo into a status quo minus. Thus the Federal Republic could not abandon its calls for a new allied initiative on reunification.

These calls were begun in August, 1963, and repeated many times thereafter, primarily in NATO councils, but they failed to achieve any response above the level of unpublicized departmental deliberations. America’s official preference for long-run bridge-building and the absence of allied pronouncements such as the Berlin declaration of 1957 led to some low-key recriminations from Bonn that German unity was being put on ice, that more generally
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Washington showed a potentially dangerous tendency to give global concerns priority over European problems lying at the heart of the cold war.

In order to get its prime concern back on the diplomatic agenda, Bonn proposed some variation of the old idea of a permanent four-power commission to consider the German problem. At a minimum, it was hoped that formation of such a body would lead to the establishment of mixed German committees on a parity basis, through which the Federal Republic could work more freely to extend contacts with East Germany beyond economic affairs to travel, cultural and sport exchanges, and a general easing of zonal restrictions. At a maximum, it was hoped that under the auspices of such a forum, designed to evolve procedures leading to reunification, the political, if not final legal, assurances on the borders and armament of a united Germany could be given to the East European countries. The small steps required to prepare for an eventual fusion of the East and West German systems could be expanded and linked to the larger diplomatic issues involved in any over-all settlement. In the absence of such a forum, however, Bonn’s rapprochement with the East in the interest of reunification was bound to proceed slowly, if not backfire completely, since every increase in contact with East Germany carried the risk of enhancing the Ulbricht regime, and every concessionary gesture to Germany’s eastern neighbors would be misrepresented by the Communists as a step toward recognizing the division.

Unable to engage the allies in serious consideration of new procedures for preparing and defining the contents of a German settlement, Bonn was unwilling to make unilateral and separate revelations
of what it would probably concede in exchange for unity, since it was Soviet practice to take such bargaining bids as self-understood preliminary concessions and begin talks with demands for new ones. Statements from West Germany on the great questions of the size, military status, and alignment of a future Germany remained either rigid reminders of the principle, "No concessions without counter-concessions," or vague references to new proposals contained in classified memoranda to the allies. The juncture was unsatisfactory to all but the Communist countries, who kept on unabated with their diatribes against West German militarism and revanchism, while East Germany was unprecedentedly active in shoring up its position as the second sovereign German state with the Soviet Union and the underdeveloped nations. The campaign to force the West out of Berlin and into relations with Ulbricht had ceased, but the climate of European politics across the demarcation line was still unsettled. Then, in the wake of America's efforts under Kennedy to spearhead a movement toward détente in the period after the Cuban missile crisis, French policy under de Gaulle rapidly crystallized into a series of independent and controversial pronouncements on the unsolved political issues in Europe.