



Ronald Reagan in Berlin

The President and the Divided City

by Jens Schöne

BeBra Wissenschaft Verlag

Ronald Reagan in Berlin

This is a joint publication by the
Ernst Reuter Archives Foundation and the
Berlin Commissioner for the Reappraisal
of the SED Dictatorship

It is a translation of *Ronald Reagan in Berlin.*
Der Präsident, die Staatssicherheit und die
geteilte Stadt by Jens Schöne.

Jens Schöne

Ronald Reagan in Berlin

The President and the Divided City

Translated by Jessica Wood

BeBra Wissenschaft Verlag

Bibliographic Information of the German National Library
The German National Library lists this publication in the
German National Bibliography; detailed bibliographic data
are retrievable online at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.



This book is an open access publication. It is licensed under the Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).
For the full license terms, see <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.

For questions regarding product safety, please contact herstellung@bebraverlag.de.

Original German title

Ronald Reagan in Berlin. Der Präsident, die Staatssicherheit und die geteilte Stadt

First published as Ernst-Reuter-Heft, issue 7, 2nd updated edition, Berlin 2017.

BeBra Wissenschaft Verlag is an imprint of BeBra Verlag.

First English edition

© 2026 BeBra Verlag GmbH

Asternplatz 3, 12203 Berlin

post@bebraverlag.de

Series Editor: Michael C. Bienert

Proofreading: Penny Croucher, London/Leonie Steger, Berlin/Jessica Wood, Lichfield

Cover and Typesetting: typgerecht berlin

Printed in the European Union

ISBN 978-3-95410-360-7

www.bebra-wissenschaft.de



Ronald Reagan over time

When Ronald Wilson Reagan, the 40th President of the United States of America, took office in January 1981, he could already look back on a colorful life. Born in Illinois, in the Midwest, on February 6, 1911, and raised in humble circumstances, his professional life was extremely varied. Among other roles, he worked as a sports reporter and trade union official, TV presenter, and film actor – and not as unsuccessfully as is often assumed today. A supporter of the Democratic Party until the early 1960s, he then made a career as a committed member of the Republican Party, leading to his election as Governor of the State of California in November 1966. After being re-elected for a second term, he left this post at the beginning of 1975 and quickly turned his attention to a higher goal: the presidency. On his first attempt, however, he failed to defeat the incumbent President Gerald Ford at the Republican National Convention in 1976. Four years later, Reagan's moment finally came: nominated as a candidate by his party, he won a landslide victory against Jimmy Carter, who had proven somewhat hapless as President. On January 20, 1981, Reagan was sworn into office on the steps of the Washington Capitol.

Hardly any other president of the twentieth century was and remains as polarizing as Ronald Reagan. Some view him as a ruthless “Cold War monger,” the driving force behind the arms race and an expansionist foreign policy. They hold him responsible for massive cuts in the social sector, the dramatic widening of the gulf between the wealthy and the poor in America's population, and a budget deficit that reached dizzying heights. Others emphasize Reagan's real and perceived successes, claiming that his policies brought the Soviet Union to its knees economically and ended the Cold War. Unemployment and inflation fell noticeably during his time in office, and the USA rose

to its former greatness. Regardless of how one judges his policies, the transformation processes they triggered were so comprehensive that they were soon given their own name: the “Reagan Revolution.”

In terms of foreign policy, Reagan took an aggressive anti-communist course with a religious foundation, relying on the strength of the US economy and aiming from the outset to push the Soviet Union beyond its economic limits with a ruinous arms race. Even before Reagan entered office, however, these ideas had played an important role in American politics. By the time Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan in December 1979, the fragile thaw in relations between the major powers had broken off. Even in the small German Democratic Republic (GDR), people were aware that hardship could lie ahead: “[i]n the conception of American policy vis-à-vis the socialist countries, Eastern experts in the US State Department believe that in these countries a range of factors will, over the next few years, lead to internal tension and conflict and severely hinder the establishment of a political consensus between leadership and population. In particular, these factors include the finite nature of Soviet reserves of raw materials, the technological backwardness of the socialist countries, and the population’s growing demands in terms of consumption [...]”¹

This assessment from 1976 was to prove almost prophetic – but things had not quite reached that point yet. At the start of his presidency, Reagan, who signed extensive disarmament treaties during his second term in office, initially adopted a policy of comprehensive rearmament and confrontation. In his dichotomous view of the world, there was little room for differentiation. The “Evil Empire,” as he described

1 Foreign policy information overview no. 3/76 of January 16, 1978, in Federal Commissioner for the Records of the State Security Service of the Former GDR (BStU), HVA, no. 81, part 3, sheet 506.



Ronald Reagan's inauguration in Washington, January 20, 1981.

the Soviet Union in a high-profile speech given on March 8, 1983, needed to be eradicated. But what role did his visits to West Berlin – which many Americans regarded as an “outpost of freedom” – play? Reagan’s call to Mikhail Gorbachev to open the Brandenburg Gate and tear down the Wall stands within the canon of contemporary history’s most important speeches. For the most part, however, this exhausts what is known about the relationship between the American President and the divided metropolis. His other visits to the city remain largely unknown, although they had a recognizable influence on him or provided him with a stage for the promotion of his policies – and sometimes both. Reagan visited the divided city four times, twice as President. In so doing, he continued a long-lasting tradition: he was by no means the first American head of state to visit Berlin, nor would he be the last. Nevertheless, he set his own tone. This will be explored in the

following essay, as will the background and consequences of his stays in the divided city. Reagan's visits as President in 1982 and 1987 will be foregrounded, but due consideration must also be given to his visits of 1978 and 1990, as they claim a particular significance in the overall context of Ronald Reagan's policies. In addition, the reception of Reagan's guest appearances in the GDR will be examined. Officially, they were either ignored or provoked angry protest; but what did people in East Berlin really know about Reagan's visits and how did they generate pressure to act? The Ministry for State Security, responsible for reconnaissance in enemy territory, deserves particular attention in this respect. This organization was supposed to be omniscient, but the presidential visits show that this was by no means the case. The reactions of the GDR's security organs were therefore largely limited to monitoring or steering their own population. This will also be explored.

Background and initial experiences

West Berlin, located in the middle of the GDR and thus in the heart of the Soviet sphere of influence, took on a unique importance in the Cold War. The divided city represented an exposed flank of the communist realm of power until the construction of the Wall in 1961, after which it retained a high symbolic significance. Accordingly, it received particular attention from US presidents, who repeatedly visited the city.² John F. Kennedy's eight-hour visit on June 26, 1963, which was etched deep into the collective memory on both sides of the Atlantic, set the tone. Barely two years after the Wall was built, he was enthusiastically received by the population of West Berlin, which was still anxious about the future. Kennedy's itinerary, which included a tour of the city, a visit to the Brandenburg Gate and Checkpoint Charlie, a meeting with members of the US army, and a public address, was to have a lasting influence on the travel plans of many of his successors in office. With the words "Ich bin ein Berliner!" ("I am a Berliner!"), and his lesser-known appeal, "Lasst sie nach Berlin kommen" ("Let them come to Berlin"), he established another custom that has been repeatedly invoked, right up to the present day.

It was not until Reagan's visit in June 1987 that the same sustained public and media attention that had characterized Kennedy's appearance would be repeated, although two other US presidents had in fact travelled to the city in the meantime. On February 27, 1969, an inhos-

2 For the events described below, see 'Der Regierende Bürgermeister von Berlin – Senatskanzlei, Abläufe der bisherigen Besuche der US-Präsidenten Kennedy, Nixon und Carter vom 28. April 1982' ('The Governing Mayor of Berlin – Senate Chancellery, Order of events of previous visits by US Presidents Kennedy, Nixon and Carter on April 28, 1982'), in the Berlin Landesarchiv (LAB), B Rep. 002, no. 21778, no sheet information.

Richard Nixon
shakes the hands
of passers-by,
February 27, 1969.



pitable winter's day, Richard Nixon had spent about four hours in the metropolis as part of an eight-day trip to Europe. He already knew the city from private visits (including one in July 1963) and had even undertaken an excursion to East Berlin. He concluded that “the people of East Berlin undoubtedly live under the strictest conditions that exist anywhere in the world.”³

During his visit of 1969, almost six years later, Nixon laid a wreath at the Airlift memorial at Tempelhof airport, looked over the Wall towards the East at Prinzenstraße in Kreuzberg, left his vehicle on

3 “Wir hätten auf die Mauer härter reagieren sollen!” *Spiegel*-Gespräch mit dem ehemaligen Vize-Präsidenten der USA, Richard M. Nixon’ (“‘We should have reacted more strongly to the Wall!’ *Spiegel* interview with the former vice president of the USA, Richard M. Nixon’), *Der Spiegel* 31:1963, pp. 19–21, here p. 20.

Kurfürstendamm to speak directly with the population, and signed the city's Golden Book at Charlottenburg Palace. After a stop at the Siemens factories in Spandau and a speech to more than 5,000 workers, he was finally given a ceremonial goodbye at Tegel airport (in a break with tradition, as all other presidents used Tempelhof airport during the city's period of division) and disappeared.

Yet as short as his visit was, Nixon used it to affirm America's commitment to West Berlin and demonstrate the close alliance between the two partners. This gained him the praise of the vast majority of the populations involved. For the first time, however, a note of discord could be heard amid the cheers of approval. Against the backdrop of the war in Vietnam and the student movement, protests took place that may have been limited in terms of numbers but nonetheless represented an unprecedented phenomenon. In recent years, politically unpopular visitors had certainly sparked significant upheaval, but never before had this been directed at high-ranking American politicians. On February 27, 1969, a new precedent was set: in front of the buildings of the Technical University, students burned flags and engaged in fierce confrontations with the approaching police. In the following years, this proved to be merely the beginning. Within this context, Reagan's visits to West Berlin as US President would represent an inglorious climax.

After Nixon's visits, relations between West Germany and the USA cooled noticeably over the course of the 1970s. The Vietnam War, the oil and economic crises, terrorism, the weakening of the dollar, and dramatic structural change to the economy forced both political and economic attention onto other issues, but in 1978 the tide seemed to turn – especially in West Berlin. It was the thirtieth anniversary of the start of the Airlift, and 15 years had passed since Kennedy's visit, shifting the focus onto common ground once again. At this point, the next president made his arrival: Jimmy Carter. Five years earlier, as Gov-

ernor of the State of Georgia, he had visited the city and travelled to East Berlin privately. Now, as head of state, he spent four hours in the metropolis with his wife and daughter on July 15, 1978. The fact that he was not acting altruistically was well noted and prompted *Der Spiegel* to make a biting comment: “[i]f America’s President, Jimmy Carter, comes to West Berlin on Saturday of this week, the city on the Spree will be given a new status, putting it on an equal footing with Clinton (Massachusetts), population 13,300, and Yazoo City (Mississippi), population 11,732.”⁴

This sarcastic comment was a response to one of the items on Carter’s itinerary: the so-called Town Hall Meeting. This gathering, which drew intense media attention, was attended by 1,000 of the city’s residents, who had been carefully selected beforehand and subjected to a “political review.”⁵ After laying a wreath at the memorial to the Airlift and the obligatory glimpse across the inner-city border, Carter answered their questions. Above all, his aim was to send a signal to his own country. The next presidential election campaign was looming, and Carter’s appearance in West Berlin allowed him to position himself as a worldly statesman through a typically American event held at the European “outpost of freedom.” His rival for the highest office of state would not enjoy the same opportunity. Carter believed that the occasion would enable him to secure a significant competitive advantage.

The East German secret police and their informers on the ground observed the Town Hall Meeting with great interest, especially as Carter mentioned his earlier visit to the eastern part of the city and expressed his intention to return during his next tour. This statement

4 ‘Carter-Besuch. Hoffen und beten’ (‘Carter Visit. Hope and Prayer’), *Der Spiegel* 28:1978, p. 24.

5 Order of events of previous visits (see note 2).



Jimmy Carter (left) and Dietrich Stobbe (right), the Governing Mayor of Berlin, look over the Wall at the border security installations, July 15, 1978.

was evaluated by the Ministry for State Security (MfS) in its own particular way. According to the MfS, Carter's words merely reflected the USA's general legal conception of the Berlin question, but had no real significance in practice. "In view of the political situation, neither Carter nor any future US president would seriously consider travelling to the capital of the GDR during a visit to West Berlin."⁶ In a narrow sense, the authors of this statement were correct, but more broadly they were wrong: for a future president did indeed find his way to West and East Berlin in 1978. His name was Ronald Reagan.

Reagan and his advisors had recognized that he had a major shortcoming as a candidate, and that this would need to be addressed before

6 Foreign policy information overview no. 31/78 of July 31, 1978, in BStU, HVA, no. 81, part 1, sheet 135.

pursuing another presidential nomination: his lack of foreign policy experience. On the domestic front, Reagan's governorship had earned him sufficient credentials, but in terms of foreign policy he was virtually unknown. Although he had not yet announced whether he would run again, he needed to be prepared. For this reason, two visits (each lasting several days) were planned for 1978: one to East Asia (Japan, Taiwan, and Hong Kong) during the spring, and one to Europe at the end of the year. The primary aim of the trips was not to gather detailed knowledge about the countries and places visited, but rather to send a signal to potential voters. Carter had demonstrated his aptitude for foreign policy in Berlin to great public effect, and now Reagan was to follow suit.

After Great Britain and France, the Federal Republic of Germany was the final stop on Reagan's European tour. On November 30, he spoke with Chancellor Helmut Schmidt. He then met with the Leader of the Opposition, Helmut Kohl, who later made a pointed remark about the meeting: "our discussions lasted longer than originally planned. It struck me that he knew practically nothing of Europe but that he possessed a skill that is rare among politicians – the ability to listen. He was very interested in the question of German division."⁷ Further talks followed, including one with West Berlin's Governing Mayor, Dietrich Stobbe, who was in the capital of Bonn as acting President of the Bundesrat. The same evening, Reagan, his wife Nancy, and their companions flew to Berlin's Tempelhof airport, settled in to Hotel Kempinski on Kurfürstendamm, and prepared for the eventful day ahead.

⁷ Helmut Kohl, *Erinnerungen 1930–1982* (Munich: 2004), p. 582.



On the occasion of Jimmy Carter's visit, GDR border guards remove graffiti from the western side of the Berlin Wall, July 15, 1978.

Reagan's trip did not go unnoticed in East Berlin. More than a week before it began, it was the subject of top-secret documents within the Ministry for State Security. There, alongside his visit to Bonn (and subsequent flight to Munich), Reagan's other travel plans were also noted: "[f]urthermore, this US citizen will be visiting WB on 12.01.78 [December 1, 1978]."⁸ The secret service regarded itself as prepared and intended to leave nothing to chance – which makes what happened next even more surprising.

December 1, 1978, a Friday, started out rainy. Dietrich Stobbe, who had in the meantime returned from Bonn to the divided city, invited Ronald and Nancy Reagan as well as several of their companions

⁸ Information no. 8302 from November 21, 1978, in BStU, HA III, no. 13454, sheet 11. "WB" indicates West Berlin here.

(including Reagan's close advisors, Richard Allen and Peter Hannaford) on a private bus tour of the city. Around 10:30 in the morning, the group reached Checkpoint Charlie, the inner-city border crossing, just as John F. Kennedy had done 15 years previously. Wary eyes observed their movements from the eastern section of the city: "[a]t the same time, approx. 10 civilians arrived in another bus [...]. One female and one male individual were filmed by the aforementioned camera team beneath the sector sign and right in front of the checkpoint building."⁹ While the identities of the individuals are not explicitly stated here, the security services knew perfectly well who they were dealing with.

Another stop was made at the western side of the Brandenburg Gate. Kennedy had come here too, and hardly a decade after his first visit, Reagan would give his most famous speech on precisely the same spot. As his companions recalled, Reagan was deeply affected by the sight of the Wall, and expressed his hope that there must be a way to bring it down. Around midday, the group arrived at the US headquarters in Dahlem and dined with military personnel. In his brief address, Reagan made his position clear once more: "I hope you will never think of it [the Wall] as something permanent."¹⁰

The spectacular itinerary of the afternoon can only be reconstructed with the help of surviving eyewitness accounts, namely those of Allen and Hannaford. While the MfS kept its eye on Reagan, it certainly had not reckoned with one possibility: that he might enter East Berlin. It is likely that Reagan expressed this desire spontaneously at the US headquarters, before putting his money where his mouth was. Accompanied by his two advisors and their wives, he set off for the eastern part of the

9 Report of December 1, 1978, in BStU, HA VI, no. 640, sheet 20.

10 'Reagan lunches with 2–6 troops,' *Berlin Observer*, December 8, 1978, p. 1.



Ronald and Nancy Reagan at Checkpoint Charlie, December 1, 1978.

city in two cars with uniformed drivers, but the security agencies there paid them no further notice. The archival documents that have so far been found only record the border crossing. At 14:22 Reagan passed through Checkpoint Charlie, and by 15:18 he had returned to West Berlin, “without incident.”¹¹

If one believes Reagan’s companions, the trip had a lasting impact on him.¹² The surviving reports may be contradictory and in some places unconvincing, but the basic details are clear: the entourage made its way through a bleak cityscape full of undeveloped plots of land and ruins from the Second World War to Alexanderplatz. Here, the group visited the department store, where the Americans were struck by the sparse range of goods on offer. While the women remained in the store, the men made their way into Alexanderplatz and observed a man being checked and harassed by heavily armed police, apparently without reason. According to the two advisors, this scene etched itself deep onto Reagan’s memory and strengthened his anti-communist engagement. He later referred to it several times.

After returning to West Berlin, Reagan had one last appointment that day, at the Axel Springer publishing house. Here, too, there was a vivid reminder of the division of the city and its sometimes barbaric consequences: the company’s headquarters, which stood almost directly on the Wall, overlooked the spot where 18-year-old Peter Fechter had been shot by East German border guards in August 1962. Peter had

11 Report from December 1, 1978, in BStU, HA VI, no. 640, sheet 21.

12 Cf. Richard V. Allen, ‘The Man Who Won The Cold War,’ *Hoover Digest* 1:2000, cf. <http://www.hoover.org/research/man-who-won-cold-war> (accessed on August 30, 2016); Peter Hannaford, ‘Zuhören und lernen. Ronald Reagans erster Berlin-Besuch 1978,’ in Helmut Trotnow and Florian Weiß (ed.), *Tear down this wall. US-Präsident Ronald Reagan vor dem Brandenburger Tor, 12. Juni 1987* (Berlin: 2007), pp. 70–81.

been attempting to cross the death strip between the two halves of the city when he was wounded by several shots. He subsequently bled to death, slowly and publicly, while making desperate pleas for help. The incident was described to Reagan late in the afternoon of December 1, 1978, and left a deep impression.¹³

When the potential presidential candidate left Berlin for Munich that evening, he found that his basic convictions had been unambiguously confirmed. All sources indicate that he had shown great interest in the question of German-German division, and had given it intense consideration. Publicly, his time in Berlin had hardly been noticed – not least of all because another visit had occupied the attention of the media. A few days earlier, intense and violent clashes had broken out in Frankfurt am Main, sparked by the arrival of the Shah of Iran in the city. Reagan's visit was comparatively overshadowed, partly due to the fact that he was still relatively unknown in Europe. Consequently, there were no protests. The German media reported diffidently, and the visit to East Berlin was not mentioned for the time being. American newspapers, on the other hand, had picked up the events promptly. After the *Washington Post* published a short article on December 2, the *Los Angeles Times* (among others) followed up in detail the next day. The article in the *Los Angeles Times* clearly stated that the European trip had largely served to enhance Reagan's image and competence, concluding that it was primarily of symbolic importance. At the same time, however, the article noted with appreciation that he had not shied away from venturing "into the land of the Communists" by visiting East Berlin.¹⁴ Reagan's trip had therefore achieved a number of important

13 Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 78–80.

14 *Los Angeles Times*, December 3, 1978, p. 26.

aims, sending strong images and messages to potential voters. Reagan could be satisfied; his visit to Berlin had been a profitable one. When he returned many years later, he did so under very different circumstances, with far-reaching consequences.

"Berlin remains Berlin"

At the beginning of November 1980, immediately after his election as the 40th President of the United States and even before his inauguration, Reagan received an invitation from West Berlin's new Governing Mayor, Richard von Weizsäcker, to visit the divided city again. Another invitation was extended by the President of the Berlin House of Representatives, Heinrich Lummer, at the start of 1981. For the time being, however, these invitations were not taken up: Reagan initially turned his attention to domestic politics, and he also faced an assassination attempt on May 30, 1981, during which a bullet left him badly wounded.

At the same time, two closely linked developments became the focus of national and international debate: the nuclear arms race and the peace movement that it inspired. The NATO Double-Track Decision of December 1979, which planned for the stationing of nuclear-tipped cruise missiles in Western Europe as well as disarmament negotiations with the Soviet Union, sparked emotionally charged disputes that triggered radical changes. In the Federal Republic of Germany, the founding of the Green Party took place within this context, as did the collapse of Helmut Schmidt's government in October 1982 and the subsequent chancellorship of Helmut Kohl.

The Double-Track Decision was taken before Reagan's election, but his aggressive arms policy and equally harsh Cold War rhetoric soon made him *the* enemy of the peace movement in both the East and West. But this overlooked the fact that he had adopted a two-pronged approach from the outset: while he wanted to be prepared for heavily armed confrontation with the Soviet Union, he also consistently emphasized the need for disarmament talks. Directly before his second visit to Berlin, he summed up his underlying conviction: "[...] the sim-

ple hope for peace is not enough. [...] To those who march for peace, my heart is with you. I would be at the head of your parade if I believed marching alone could bring about a more secure world.”¹⁵

To those who advocated a policy of *détente*, these words must have sounded like mockery. Increasing armament – culminating in the “Strategic Defense Initiative” (SDI), also known as “Star Wars” – was met with protests. The impressive climax was a peace demonstration on June 10, 1982, in the German capital of Bonn, in which half a million people took part. The political and social climate throughout Western Europe was heating up. It was against this backdrop that Reagan made his second trip to Berlin.

Since Chancellor Schmidt’s visit to Washington in May 1981, there had been growing signs that such an event might take place, but a final decision was not reached until March 1982. This was partly due to security concerns, as left-wing alternative groups had announced determined protests in West Berlin. In September 1981, a visit by the US Secretary of State, Alexander Haig, had led to serious riots, which made the Americans hesitant. Eventually, however, those in favor of the visit finally prevailed, although it was stipulated that, “according to information from Bonn, a final commitment [depends on] a convincing Berlin concept.” The visit would need to be carefully staged, and intense debates were held in advance. Almost all possible locations were considered for this major event: Tempelhof airport, the summer gardens beneath the radio tower, the concert hall of the Berliner Philharmonie, and many other places. Finally, the palace gardens of Schloss Charlott-

15 ‘Address Before the Bundestag in Bonn, Federal Republic of Germany,’ Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum (website), cf. <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/address-bundestag-bonn-federal-republic-germany> (accessed on October 5, 2022).



Demonstration on Kurfürstendamm, June 10, 1982.

tenburg were chosen. This site offered “an historic location, manageable access, an attractive landscape and appearance, the opportunity to sign the Golden Book, and the option of a concert or similar event in the palace itself, which could easily be combined with an event in the palace gardens.”¹⁶

In public, in the media, and behind the scenes of politics, fierce arguments raged about the upcoming visit. The Soviet Union offered its protests through diplomatic channels. In a survey carried out by Infratest, 81% of West Berliners over the age of 14 voiced their support for the visit, but the dissenting minority managed to seize control of the narrative. The Evangelische Studentengemeinde (Protestant Student

16 Confidential note of March 12, 1982, in LAB, B Rep. 002, no. 26440, no sheet information.

Community) announced a protest for the day before the presidential visit, and on one day alone – May 26, 1985 – the police noted 25 cases of “graffiti and posters with political content,” “all of which directed insults at the US President or the US protecting power.”¹⁷ “*Weine nicht, wenn der Reagan fällt*” was just one of the many slogans that attentive observers were likely to spot throughout the city.¹⁸ The Governing Mayor was also overwhelmed with letters demanding everything from the withdrawal of Reagan’s invitation to the organization of “mass welcomes” to greet him.¹⁹

In this confusing and conflicting situation, the Ministry for State Security also sought orientation. In West Berlin, it could only watch from the sidelines, but in one respect Reagan’s visit touched the GDR directly. On June 10 and 11, numerous demonstrators “with a thoroughly decadent appearance” travelled along the transit routes from West Germany into East Germany. Intelligence officials immediately feared that this could lead to uncontrolled encounters with the population of the GDR. To prevent this, 149 motor vehicles “with a total of 550 young FRG citizens” were observed as part of a “targeted filtration of contractual traffic.” Hectic scenes broke out when a rumor spread that a number of individuals from Pinneberg had planned an attack on Reagan. Despite intensive surveillance of seven vehicles from this area, however, this fear was never substantiated. In fact, the staff of

17 Situation report no. 117/82 of May 27, 1982, in *ibid.*, no. 21778, no sheet information.

18 This slogan literally translates as “Don’t cry if Reagan falls” and refers to a song called “*Weine nicht, wenn der Regen fällt*” (“Don’t cry if the rain falls”) by German singer Drafi Deutscher. The slogan plays on the fact that the name “Reagan” is pronounced almost the same as the German word for “rain” – “Regen.”

19 Cf. for example the corresponding texts in Situation report no. 117/82 of May 27, 1982, in LAB, B Rep. 002, no. 21778, no sheet information.

the MfS were left somewhat surprised: contrary to their expectations, those travelling along the transit routes “made a visible effort to prevent contact with outsiders, including GDR citizens.” In addition, although they were openly monitored by the People’s Police at rest areas during breaks in their journey, “no provocation or rioting occurred.” Indeed, the young people were “exceptionally polite and courteous.”²⁰

In West Berlin, this was only true to a limited extent. In the evening, before the President flew in for about three hours, an authorized demonstration marched from Wittenbergplatz to Schloss Charlottenburg under the motto “Stand up for peace” (“Aufstehen für den Frieden”). The tens of thousands of impassioned participants demanded peace, disarmament, and a policy of *détente*. Aside from minor scuffles, a few broken windows, and two burning cars, the evening remained calm. After the official closing rally in Luisenplatz, not far from Schloss Charlottenburg, the crowd dispersed from 20:00. However, during the march, there had been repeated calls to gather in Schöneberg’s Nollendorfplatz the following morning. The “Alternative Liste” (“Alternative Ballot”) had declared an additional demonstration for 10:00 the next day, but this had been prohibited by the police due to security concerns.²¹ Only after Reagan had left the city should further protests be

20 Report on the results of the political and operational security of identified demonstrators at the anti-Reagan rally in West Berlin on June 10, 1982, in BStU, HA XX/II, no. 5230/1, pp. 49 f; Operative Information no. 443/82 of June 11, 1982, in *ibid.*, HA VI, no. 1321, pp. 16–20, the quotations *ibid.* Incidentally, the findings reached by the MfS also included the statement that Nancy Reagan had recently looked “like a mummy.”

21 The “Alternative Ballot for Democracy and Environmental Protection” was a left-wing alternative party founded in West Berlin in 1978. It merged with the Green Party in 1980, but retained its old name as its regional association.

Protest against
the American
President's visit
to Berlin,
June 11, 1982.



able to take place – a view that was upheld by the Higher Administrative Court.

But events unfolded quite differently. On June 11, 1982, West Berlin experienced the most violent riots in its history, ignited by Reagan's presence. Indeed, the images most often associated with his visit of 1987 had already been seen five years earlier: barricades in the streets, burning cars, street battles between police and masked protesters. A mob swept through the streets of the inner city, and the police only exacerbated the situation with an overly heavy-handed response. De-escalation was still a foreign term, and both sides clashed relentlessly. The fire service declared a state of emergency, and the skirmishes between the security forces and several thousand violent left-wing individuals (most of whom were young) continued into the evening. Over 250 people were arrested, more than 40 people were taken to hospital,



Riots in Nollendorfplatz, Schöneberg, June 11, 1982.

and as night fell over the city, a sense of helplessness at the outbreaks of violence descended.²²

None of this reached Ronald Reagan, who experienced a completely different Berlin. The desired *mise-en-scène* was executed perfectly. At 9:41, the President's aircraft landed at Tempelhof airport, where he met with members of the American troops and their families. As in 1978, his next stop was the Allied border crossing Checkpoint Charlie. Accompanied by Chancellor Helmut Schmidt and Governing Mayor Richard von Weizsäcker, a huge media circus awaited him. Once the obligatory photos had been taken, Reagan was swiftly transported to Schloss Charlottenburg. Here, the fact that even invited guests were

22 The MfS observed and recorded the events very closely. Cf. the report General Incidents of June 11 and 12, 1982, in BStU, ZOS, no. 2262, pp. 176–183.

denied access to the palace grounds from 10:00 due to security reasons, which had not been communicated in advance, had caused considerable displeasure beforehand. Overall, however, the mood was relaxed, and those present awaited the President's address with great interest. Two days earlier, Reagan had caused a stir with a (private) speech in London, during which he had presented his strictly anti-communist credo: "[w]hat I am describing now is a plan and a hope for the long term – the march of freedom and democracy which will leave Marxism-Leninism on the ash-heap of history as it has left other tyrannies which stifle the freedom and muzzle the self-expression of the people."²³ These words certainly did not lack clarity: would Reagan now up the ante?

He did not. Instead, Reagan adopted the double strategy mentioned above. The rhetorical attack was followed by the offer of talks and mutual rapprochement: "I would like to extend a challenge to the leaders of the Soviet bloc – a new Berlin initiative. This is an invitation to peace."²⁴ Reagan suggested trust-building measures as well as concrete disarmament steps, explicitly stating that the US was prepared to take far-reaching measures. Quoting an old pop song, he uttered the almost inescapable sentence in German: "Berlin bleibt doch Berlin" ("Berlin is still Berlin"). His audience was thrilled. Reagan also remembered the event positively: "[f]inal event a speech at Charlottenburg Castle gardens to 25,000 Germans waving American flags."²⁵ From his perspective, the visit had been a great success. At precisely 12:58 – as the MfS noted – he and his entourage left West Berlin by air.

23 Cited in Richard Aldous, *Reagan and Thatcher* (London: 2013) p. 112.

24 The text of the speech can be found in LAB, B Rep. 002, no. 26439, no sheet information.

25 Ronald Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries*, ed. by Douglas Brinkley (New York: 2007), p. 88.



Police intervention on Winterfeldtstraße, Schöneberg, June 11, 1982.

If Reagan's first visit to Berlin had primarily served to gather information and demonstrate his expertise in terms of foreign policy, his second visit had pursued rather different aims. In London, Reagan had once again clearly presented the Europeans with his fundamental political convictions regarding the communist world, which he felt belonged on the funeral pyre of history. At the same time, however, he wanted to convince his own partners that he was "no trigger-happy cowboy": his visit to Berlin was part of this strategy.²⁶ Reagan's disarmament offer to the Soviet Union signaled his willingness to compromise and marked the beginning of a process of rapprochement that eventually led to a policy of *détente* between the major powers in the middle of the

26 Andrew Busch, *Ronald Reagan and the Politics of Freedom* (Oxford: 2001), p. 205.



Ronald Reagan's
address in the
park of Schloss
Charlottenburg,
June 11, 1982.

decade. But his visit to Berlin in 1982 also clearly illustrated just how controversial Reagan had become. Both the peaceful demonstrators and the masked rioters saw him as a completely one-dimensional figure and reacted accordingly. In so doing, they established rituals that would be performed again five years later. From this perspective, Reagan's two visits were strikingly similar, but the President was in no way the "Cold War monger" that many believed him to be. He was always good for a surprise, as became astoundingly apparent during his next visit to Berlin, in June 1987.

The staged triumph

When Reagan issued his disarmament invitation to Moscow from West Berlin, he appealed to the Soviet Union's head of state and party leader Leonid Brezhnev, who died later that year and was succeeded by Yuri Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko in quick succession. All three men were orthodox communists who remained true to the ways of thinking of the Cold War. Nevertheless, Reagan made several attempts to enter into discussions with top Soviet officials – while simultaneously pursuing militarization himself. At the beginning of 1983, he had his Vice President, George Bush, read out an “open letter to the people of Europe,” which invited Andropov to a meeting to initiate negotiations for the destruction of all medium-range nuclear missiles, “*wherever and whenever he wants.*”²⁷ The fact that this letter was read out in public in West Berlin was no coincidence. Indeed, the divided city had long since established itself as an effective stage for political messages, not least of all through presidential visits. But Reagan's appeals fell flat: against the backdrop of an intense arms race, disarmament negotiations between the superpowers finally broke off at the end of 1983.

The turning point came in March 1985, as Mikhail Gorbachev, a comparatively young and agile functionary, ascended to the upper echelons of the Soviet leadership. His aim was not to weaken the position of the Eastern bloc, but he realized that its self-imposed rigidity in the global ideological conflict was leading to precisely such debilitation. For this reason, he called for the policies of Glasnost (“openness”) and Perestroika (“restructuring”). These policies led to completely different

²⁷ Quoted in *Financial Times*, February 1, 1983, p. 1.



Meeting between Ronald Reagan (left) and Mikhail Gorbachev (right) in Geneva, November 19, 1985.

results than originally intended, but simultaneously triggered a new rapprochement between the Soviet Union and the United States. The door to bilateral talks was open again, and the first summit meeting between Reagan and Gorbachev took place in Geneva in November 1985. Although this meeting did not produce any concrete results, it led to a lasting reduction in tensions and formed the basis for future steps. In addition, both sides also acknowledged their responsibilities regarding the global community, something that would have been unthinkable for a long time beforehand: “[a]s you will remember, at that time we noted the special responsibility of the USSR and the United States of America for the preservation of peace. We jointly declared that nuclear war must never be unleashed and that there would be no victor in such a scenario. This was a statement of tremendous significance. We also declared that neither side would seek military supe-

riority.”²⁸ Indeed, it was on this basis that far-reaching disarmament measures were agreed just a year later, at a second summit meeting in Reykjavik.

This new era of détente formed the backdrop for Reagan’s trip to Berlin in June 1987, but this was just one side of the coin. The President was still convinced that the Soviet Union could be brought to its knees economically, and the signs of this were now also increasing at lower levels. In October 1986, for example, the Ministry for State Security, quoting high-ranking US politicians, stated that Western Europe no longer predicted the collapse of the GDR in the year 2000. In fact, “a much more rapid weakening is expected,” given that “the degree of loyalty toward the state among most GDR citizens is very low and the desire for Western living conditions is very high.” The economic situation was expected to “worsen dramatically” in the coming years, culminating in a general “crisis of legitimacy.”²⁹ The same could be said for the Soviet Union, and so militarization and demilitarization along with economic competition once again formed a dual strategy that would ultimately yield the desired successes and strongly shape Reagan’s third visit to West Berlin.

In February 1987, when it became known that Reagan would be visiting Berlin once again, the necessary background preparations got underway. From the outset, the Americans pushed for the visit to have the widest possible publicity. Against initial resistance from the Berlin administration, “they insisted on an open-air speech in front on an ‘impressive’ backdrop,” setting their sights on the Brandenburg Gate. Alternative suggestions, such as the plenary hall of the Reichstag and

28 Michail Gorbatschow, *Die wichtigsten Reden* (Cologne: 1987), p. 208.

29 Information on statements in the area of Central Europe in the US State Department of October 31, 1986, in BStU, HA XX/AKG, no. 6828, sheets 31–37.

the Congress Hall, were firmly rejected. The Americans also proved demanding in terms of the timing of the speech: they wanted to begin in the early afternoon, “to make it onto US television.”³⁰ Domestically, Reagan was under strong pressure due to the so-called Iran-Contra affair, and hoped to counter this with impressive images from the “outpost of freedom.” It was in his own interests to give an address that was as brilliant, as convincing, and as surprising as possible.

In Berlin, which celebrated its 750th anniversary in 1987, preparations for the big day unfolded in both the West and the East, at an official level, and in alternative circles. In the spring, the Berlin-USA working group reached a basic agreement on the procedure and locations of Reagan’s visit, which would take place on June 12. The remaining preparations were extensive and labor-intensive, but unspectacular. West Berlin had grown accustomed to visits from high-ranking state guests, having recently received both the French President François Mitterrand and Queen Elizabeth II. The procedures established during these visits were now paying off.

Those in the eastern part of the city also kept one eye on the President’s upcoming visit and attempted to gain as comprehensive a picture of it as possible. In May, the Ministry for State Security intercepted the invitations to the French and British ambassadors in the GDR, thus gaining a more accurate insight into the impending events.³¹ The secret service furthermore noted that the West Germans had tightened controls at the Berlin and inner-German borders from July 4, in order to hinder the arrival of possible counter-demonstrators. One day beforehand, staff from Washington reported that four different drafts of Rea-

30 Note of January 27, 1987: Berlin visit by US President Reagan on 6.12.87, in LAB, B Rep. 002, no. 20916, no sheet information.

31 Cf. the Operative Note of May 22, 1987, in BStU, HA II, no. 37174, sheets 19–25.

gan's speech, written by four different authors, were being considered: all of them were "anti-communist and anti-socialist" in their basic tone. Reagan was also expected to refer to the Wall and the division of the world that it symbolized: "reaffirmation of desire to overcome the division of europe [sic], achievement of self-determination to overcome the socialist order for all the peoples of europe [sic]."³² Nine days before Reagan's speech, one of its main themes was thus known.

For the East German rulers and their security apparatus, the greatest concern was the question of how their own population would respond to Reagan's visit and his speech at the Brandenburg Gate – and there was a very concrete reason for this. A few days before the US President's arrival, as part of West Berlin's anniversary celebrations, a three-day rock concert had taken place in front of the Reichstag, in the immediate vicinity of the inner-city border. In order to hear the music, numerous young people also gathered on the eastern side of the Wall, where they were harassed by the police and state security, who feared that they might spontaneously storm the concrete barrier. This led to a confrontation that lasted for three evenings and climaxed in loud chanting from the youthful crowd: "No more Wall," "Down with the Wall," "Down with cops."³³ What Reagan was to demand with great fanfare on June 12 had already been pre-empted by the harried music fans between June 6 and 8. In this respect, the President was by no means the first person to call for the end of German-German division in 1987.

To head off further confrontations, the MfS now focused on the "pre-emptive obstruction of activities." Alongside "guaranteeing order

32 Report from June 3, 1987, in *ibid.*, ZAIG, no. 188, sheet 30.

33 Report on the events of June 6, 7 and 8, 1987 (no date), in *ibid.*, HA IX, no. 9181, sheets 123–135.

and security” in general, this included above all the “reliable safeguarding of the state border of the GDR with West Berlin and the prevention of gatherings of persons in the vicinity of the state border, especially at the Brandenburg Gate; [...] as well as suppressing any expressions of sympathy, provocation, and hostility (especially those likely to attract public attention) and blocking any collaboration between hostile powers and correspondents or journalists from non-socialist states and West Berlin.”³⁴ Comprehensive security measures were implemented, undesirable individuals were placed under surveillance, journalists and those looking to leave the country were monitored, and the entrances to the Brandenburg Gate were strictly controlled. The secret police considered themselves to be effectively prepared.

It was not just in the East of the city that opposition was feared; a sense of nervousness had also taken hold in West Berlin. Memories of Reagan’s visit in 1982, and the clashes that had erupted, were still fresh. In addition, on May 1, 1987, dramatic conflicts between violent rioters and the police had broken out in Kreuzberg, the extent and intensity of which far overshadowed anything that had happened before. Around the same time, officials realized that trouble was also looming ahead of the President’s upcoming visit. On May 4, in the left-leaning and alternative Mehringhof theater, a plenary meeting of around 400 participants took place to discuss possible actions. “The gist: Reagan should recognize that he is entering a city that is not peaceful. In the city center, some kind of action is intended (rioting).”³⁵ On June 8, burning tires stopped a US army train between Wannsee and Lichterfelde, and leaflets bearing the slogan “Fire and flame to the American President”

34 Dimensional plan of June 11, 1987, in *ibid.*, HA II, no. 37174, sheets 67–70.

35 Situation report no. 87/1987 (no date), in LAB, B Rep. 002, no. 21781, no sheet information.

were found nearby. During the night of June 10, the police discovered incendiary devices and caltrops (used to help stop cars) at various locations. In the early hours of June 11, political slogans such as “Reagan go home” and even “Piss off” were found on the Wall behind the Brandenburg Gate. A demonstration had been announced for the evening, called for by almost 150 groups. The President’s supporters and opponents were ready; only Reagan himself was missing.

The day before his arrival, as in 1982, an “Anti-Reagan demo” with more than ten thousand participants marched through the inner city, from Kantstraße to the Urania via Kurfürstendamm. Aside from the occasional stone thrown, the demonstration remained largely peaceful, and even the final rally took place without any major incidents. When the participants dispersed around 20:30, the first clashes between the police and violent demonstrators took place. The windows of around 40 shops were smashed, six coaches were graffitied with words such as “Reagan = Mörder” (“Reagan = murderer”), and five cars were damaged (one of which was set alight). In Wittenbergplatz and Nollendorfplatz, barricades that had been erected also went up in flames. Initially, the police managed to disperse “groups of troublemakers [...] with batons and tear gas,” and order was restored around 22:00. It soon became clear, however, that this was merely the calm before the storm. Just an hour later, clashes flared up again in Kreuzberg and descended into ferocity. The protestors, as the police later noted, acted at times with “strict discipline and uniformity, like a military formation.” Barricades were erected, construction vehicles were burned, and bricks and paving slabs rained down from the rooftops. Police vehicles that had been damaged by caltrops were abandoned, and even fire engines were attacked. By the time the situation started to calm down at around 3 o’clock in



Before Reagan's speech, the security glass of the platform is cleaned, June 12, 1987.

the morning on June 12, 70 people had been arrested, 67 police officers had been injured, and parts of Kreuzberg were devastated.³⁶

On June 12, the confrontation continued, and the police did little to de-escalate the situation. A spontaneous and unsanctioned demonstration near to the Gedächtniskirche was unlawfully surrounded for hours. A “traffic ban” was imposed in Kreuzberg, the U-Bahn lines 1 and 8 were suspended, buses no longer ran, and chaos broke out on the roads. Parts of the district were cordoned off, and anyone who wished to get out had to pass through relentless identity checks. The situation continued to escalate, and in the evening there was a backlash from the protestors. Renewed street fights ensued in Kreuzberg, with both sides

36 Situation report no. 117/87 of June 12, 1987, in *ibid.*, no sheet information; Information G/O24267 of June 12, 1987, in BStU, ZOS, no. 2263, sheets 48–57.

engaging fiercely. In the early hours of June 13, the clashes finally came to an end with arrests, injuries, and devastation.

As in 1982, Reagan was not directly aware of any of this. West Berlin presented itself as an open, almost cheerful metropolis that was friendly to the USA. He landed at Tempelhof at 11:45 with his wife Nancy, before attending a meeting at Schloss Bellevue with Federal President Richard von Weizsäcker (who had accompanied him in 1982 as Governing Mayor). He then visited the Reichstag. There, alongside Bundestag President Philipp Jenninger and Chancellor Helmut Kohl, he met six “Trümmerfrauen” (literally “rubble women”) from the post-war period, who clearly left an impression on Reagan: “[m]et several elderly ladies, who had been part of the female force that cleaned bricks from the rubble & played a role in Berlin’s rebuilding.”³⁷ After acting Governing Mayor Eberhard Diepgen had shown him the Wall from the north-east balcony of the Reichstag and explained the border installations, Reagan set off to give his speech in the immediate vicinity.

25,000 invited listeners awaited him. It had not been easy to organize this impressive backdrop, which had been demanded by the Americans. Staff from West Berlin’s administration were released from work so that they could attend, extensive advertising for the event was spread among trade unions and other associations, and members of the US army and their families made up the rest of the crowd. A festive atmosphere prevailed in the Tiergarten, which had been extensively cordoned off. After welcoming speeches by Diepgen and Kohl, Reagan stepped up to the microphone. He spoke for a good 25 minutes, and his words packed a punch. Initially he lauded the economic power of Western democracies and highlighted the reconstruction efforts in

³⁷ *The Reagan Diaries*, p. 506.



Police clear
a sit-in on
Taubentzenstraße,
June 12, 1987.

West Germany and West Berlin since the Second World War. He contrasted this with his view of the Eastern bloc: “[i]n the Communist world, we see failure, technological backwardness, declining standards of health, even want of the most basic kind – too little food. Even today, the Soviet Union still cannot feed itself.” Reagan could hardly have expressed his fundamental belief in the economic superiority of the West more clearly. He then declared his readiness to take steps towards disarmament, which, however, would have to be taken from a position of strength: “[b]ecause we remained strong, today we have within reach the possibility, not merely of limiting the growth of arms, but of eliminating, for the first time, an entire class of nuclear weapons from the face of the earth.” In the midst of this, he spoke those immortal words that were met with an immediate storm of enthusiasm and still resonate in the collective memory of contemporaries to this day: “General

Secretary Gorbachev, if you seek peace, if you seek prosperity for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, if you seek liberalization, come here to this gate. Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this Wall!”³⁸

Nobody had expected Reagan to be so outspoken. The precise wording of his speech had caused headaches right up until the last minute, and there is still debate as to the exact contributions of his advisors and speech writers.³⁹ But the message itself was unmistakable and remained the most important theme of his subsequent remarks: “[l]et us work to bring the Eastern and Western parts of the city closer together.” The concrete measures that he proposed to this end ranged from the expansion of civil aviation to international conferences and exchange programs, as well as the joint hosting of the Olympic Games “in some future year.” “Yes, across Europe, this Wall will fall, for it cannot withstand faith; it cannot withstand truth. The Wall cannot withstand freedom.” With these words, Reagan’s speech was over – almost. One final thought had occurred to him, which was not present in his manuscript. He directly addressed the demonstrators protesting against him, who were kept at a distance from the President but whom he had “read about.” Pointedly, he made the following remark: “I wonder if they have ever asked themselves that if they should have the kind of government they apparently seek, no one would ever be able to do what they’re doing again.”

38 The text of the speech is reprinted in, for example, Trotnow and Weiß (ed.), *Tear down this wall*, pp. 208–232.

39 On the complicated genesis of the speech, see the relevant contributions in *ibid.* as well as Romesh Ratnesar, *Tear Down This Wall. A City, a President, and the Speech That Ended The Cold War* (New York: 2009), especially pp. 97–120.



Ronald Reagan's speech in front of the Brandenburg Gate, June 12, 1987.

With that, Reagan's speech was over. The President was once again satisfied, noting in his diary that he had been interrupted by applause 28 times. But the reactions to his remarks were by no means universally positive. In the following days, many commentators expressed criticism, claiming that Reagan's demands were out of step with the times, unrealistic given the political reality, and, above all, demonstrated a lack of understanding of the circumstances in Europe. Even if such considerations could not be completely dismissed, and even if many commentators in the mid-1980s had found a comfortable place for themselves within the status quo (which hardly seemed likely to change to them), they overlooked at least two aspects. Firstly, the former Western actor from faraway America was certainly not the first person to demand the opening up of the Wall. In East Berlin, this demand had already been made loudly and clearly. Secondly, Reagan had directed his speech not

only at Gorbachev and the Germans, but also at his own compatriots, without making this explicit. In 1987, Reagan had to deal with numerous domestic problems, quite apart from the Iran-Contra affair mentioned above. Since the previous year, the Democrats had held majorities in both houses of Congress (the Senate and the House of Representatives), which limited his room for maneuver. In addition, back in Washington, opposition from the hardliners (the hawks) was forming against Reagan's course of détente. The rate of inflation and unemployment had fallen since the beginning of his presidency, but at the same time, tax redistributions, cuts to social programs, and many other interventions in the welfare state had led to an increasing polarization between rich and poor – and thus to internal social tensions. Reagan now countered this with a bold vision, once again castigating the communist world, which could offer no alternative to his own political order. He emphasized his own position of strength as well as the general importance of the virtues he regarded as universal: faith, truth, and freedom. From this perspective, Reagan's speech was ultimately a form of self-assurance and a signal to his homeland that the course he was pursuing was correct. The "Shining City upon a Hill" that he so often invoked as a symbol of American exceptionalism also shone through clearly in his vision of the fall of the Wall. How little he himself believed in the attainment of his demands at this time can be seen in his memoirs, which were published later: "I never dreamed that in less than three years the Wall would come down and a six-thousand-pound section of it would be sent to me for my presidential library."⁴⁰

While the visitors to West Berlin applauded Reagan's speech enthusiastically, hardly 100 meters away, to the east of the Wall, the

40 Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (New York, 1990), p. 683.

scene was very different. The preventative measures put in place by the State Security Service were proving to be effective: normality seemed to prevail, especially as nothing could be heard of the events taking place in the other half of the city. Although the MfS noted an “increased concentration of individuals,” consisting of around 150 people, on the central strip of Unter den Linden, “[t]hese individuals behaved calmly; there were no expressions of sympathy with REAGAN or other forms of provocation.” The People’s Police briefly arrested three passers-by (including two who had applied to leave the country for the Federal Republic) “without causing a stir.” The most dramatic event occurred around 17:00, when Reagan was long gone: a 22-year-old bus driver, who had also applied for an exit visa, parked his articulated bus on the crossing right in front of the Brandenburg Gate, completely blocking it. He remained seated in his vehicle, locked the doors, and switched on his hazard lights. It was some time before the security forces managed to remove the troublemaker. In his subsequent interrogation, the bus driver stated that he wanted to express his support for Reagan’s demand for the opening of the Wall. The success of his undertaking was very limited, however: “his actions gained little attention as the context was not clear to outsiders.”⁴¹

By this time, Reagan was already on his way back to Bonn; Air Force One had taken off from Tempelhof shortly after 16:00. Immediately before the flight, the President and his wife had briefly hosted a party in the airport’s concourse to celebrate Berlin’s city anniversary. This was the final, relaxed item on the agenda of Reagan’s 1987 visit to Berlin.

This, Reagan’s third visit to the divided metropolis, was without doubt his most spectacular – not least of all because of his appeal to

41 Information no. 239/87 (no date), in BStU, ZAIG, no. 3595, pp. 1–5.



Ronald Reagan's appearance from the perspective of the GDR State Security, June 12, 1987. After his speech, the President takes his leave of those in the stands.

Mikhail Gorbachev to tear down the Wall. At first glance, the visit had been perfectly staged: the desired images, which were broadcast worldwide, showed a determined and confident President and a close bond between the people of West Berlin and their protecting power. The events in Kreuzberg and neighboring districts, however, demonstrated that the situation was not quite so clear-cut.

“Ich hab’ noch einen Koffer in Berlin” (“I still have a suitcase in Berlin”) was one of the German expressions with which Reagan had struggled during his speech, along with “Es gibt nur ein Berlin” (“There is only one Berlin”) and “Berliner Herz, Berliner Humor, ja, und Berliner Schnauze” (“Berliner heart, Berliner humor, yes, and Berliner bluntness”). When he returned to this imaginary suitcase three years later, he was no longer president. And that wasn’t the only thing that had changed.

One last look back

On January 19, 1989, Reagan made a note in his diary: “[t]omorrow I stop being president.”⁴² After two terms in office, his political career came to an end, at a time when the Eastern bloc was being rocked by numerous upheavals. Nobody yet guessed, however, that the bipolar world order would fundamentally change within a year. Yet this was precisely what happened, and there is no doubt that Reagan made a significant contribution to this process.

The very next year, from September 10 to 14, 1990, Reagan returned to Berlin. His visit had originally been planned for June 12, the third anniversary of his memorable speech in front of the Wall, but had to be postponed for health reasons. As with his first visit, Reagan was on a private mission, so public interest was comparatively restrained. The city on the Spree was still formally divided, but in practice this division had been overcome. The unification of Germany was just three weeks away. The Ministry for State Security could no longer devote itself to Reagan’s visit, having been swept away and eliminated in the maelstrom of the Peaceful Revolution in the GDR several months earlier.

Reagan, who was now almost 80 years old, embraced his role as elder statesman. A suitable itinerary for his visit had been drawn up by the American agency on Clayallee. Reagan, accompanied once again by his wife Nancy, took his time. Aside from a half-day detour to Bonn on September 13, where he met with Federal President von Weizsäcker and Chancellor Kohl again, he remained in the metropolis for several days, significantly longer than ever before. Receptions were held in his honor and he met leading city representatives and politicians. On Sep-

42 *The Reagan Diaries*, p. 692.

tember 12, at the invitation of the “Forum for Germany” (instigated by the Axel Springer publishing house) Reagan gave a speech worthy of a statesman in the Congress Hall. During his address – as was to be expected – he praised the East Germans for liberating themselves from the communist system and expressed his joy at the imminent unification of the two German states.

The morning of September 12 was the emotional climax of Reagan’s final visit to Berlin. First there was a meeting in the Reichstag, where Reagan was received by Rita Süßmuth, President of the German Bundestag, and the leaders of both parts of the city, Walter Momper (West) and Tino Schwierzina (East), for a brief exchange of views. The next item on the agenda was a “[w]alk to [the] Brandenburg Gate.”⁴³ In 1978, Reagan had stood to the west of the gate, and in 1987 he had called for its opening in the immediate vicinity; now he marched right through it and stepped onto East Berlin soil once again after nearly 12 years. There, with the media cameras rolling, he played the role of a “Mauerspecht” – a term used to describe those who hastened the unofficial dismantling of the Wall – using a hammer and chisel to chip away fragments of the half-demolished structure. This was followed by a meeting with the President of the GDR’s Volkskammer (People’s Parliament), Sabine Bergmann-Pohl, who was also the last leader of the declining state. This concluded Reagan’s time in East Berlin.

Two days later, Reagan departed from Tempelhof airport in the direction of Warsaw. His visit to Berlin had been tightly scheduled but politically meaningless. From the airplane, he took one last glance over the rapidly changing metropolis below. Two years later, on November 9, 1992, he would be awarded honorary citizenship of Berlin, along with

43 Note of September 11, 1990: Berlin visit of the 40th President of the USA and Mrs. Reagan including attachments, in LAB, C Rep. 101, no. 2683, no sheet information.



With a hammer and chisel, Ronald Reagan chips a few fragments from the Berlin Wall, September 12, 1990. Behind him on the right stands the Governing Mayor of Berlin, Walter Momper.

Mikhail Gorbachev and Helmut Kohl. Reagan was unable to attend the ceremony at the Reichstag for health reasons, limiting his total number of visits to Berlin to four.

These four visits all differed significantly from one another but were linked by certain constants. Reagan showed a consistent and animated interest in the question of German-German division, as well as a determination to help overcome it. By his own admission, he did not believe that such a fundamental change would be possible in the short term, yet his commitment to the cause never wavered. His speech on June 12, 1987 was, without question, the climax of this commitment. His words still garner much attention today, and rightly so. At the same time, however, they should not be overestimated. Reagan's speech did not by any means end the Cold War,⁴⁴ and there is no direct link between Reagan's appeals and the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989. His demands were just one aspect of an extremely complex set of circumstances – no more and no less. Many other factors also played a role, and it was their combined impact that eventually led to the well-known outcome.

In any case, the Ministry for State Security was wrong in its attempt to assess the significance of Reagan's speech. To do this, the MfS also drew on sources from the Federal Republic and the USA, evaluating these to arrive at the following conclusion in mid-July 1987: "[t]he reactions of the carefully selected West-Berlin audience and the international public have shown that Reagan's address will have no profound effect. On the contrary, the appearance of the American President once again highlighted his increasing weakness as a leader."⁴⁵ It quickly

44 See also (for example) Ratnesar, *Tear Down This Wall*.

45 Information no. 269/87 on reactions to the Reagan visit to West Berlin on June 12, 1987 in Westberlin, in BStU, BV Berlin, AKG, no. 2112, sheets 2–5.

became clear that this assessment was more a case of wishful thinking than accurate analysis.

And so Reagan's most famous speech can be seen as a symbol for the former President himself: it surprised and provoked, it remained unequivocal in its aims, it was and remains highly debated – and a final judgment of its significance and impact is yet to be made.

Further reading

- Richard Aldous, *Reagan and Thatcher* (London: 2013).
- Uta A. Balbier and Christiane Rösch (ed.), *Umworbener Klassenfeind. Das Verhältnis der DDR zu den USA (Forschungen zur DDR-Gesellschaft)* (Berlin: 2006).
- Henry W. Brands, *Reagan. The Life* (New York: 2015).
- Andrew Busch, *Ronald Reagan and the Politics of Freedom* (Oxford: 2001).
- Stefanie Eisenhuth, *Die Schutzmacht. Die Amerikaner in Berlin 1945–1994* (Göttingen: 2018).
- John L. Gaddis, *Der Kalte Krieg. Eine neue Geschichte* (Munich: 2007).
- Philipp Gassert, Tim Geiger and Hermann Wentker (ed.), *Zweiter Kalter Krieg und Friedensbewegung. Der NATO-Doppelbeschluss in deutsch-deutscher und internationaler Perspektive (Schriftenreihe der Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte, Sondernummer)* (Munich: 2011).
- Richard H. Immerman and Petra Goedde (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Cold War* (Oxford: 2013).
- Romesh Ratnesar, *Tear Down This Wall. A City, a President, and the Speech That Ended the Cold War* (New York: 2009).
- Ronald Reagan, *Der Präsident spricht. Ausgewählte Reden von 1961–1984* (Gütersloh: 1984).
- Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (New York: 1990).
- Ronald Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries*, ed. by Douglas Brinkley (New York: 2007).
- Wilfried Rott, *Die Insel. Eine Geschichte West-Berlins 1948–1990* (München: 2009).

- Jens Schöne, *Stabilität und Niedergang. Ost-Berlin im Jahr 1987* (Schriftenreihe des Berliner Landesbeauftragten für die Stasi-Unterlagen, Vol. 22), 6th ed. (Berlin: 2012).
- Bernd Stöver, *Der Kalte Krieg. Geschichte eines radikalen Zeitalters 1947–1991* (Munich: 2011).
- Helmut Trotnow and Florian Weiß (ed.), *Tear down this wall. US-Präsident Ronald Reagan vor dem Brandenburger Tor, 12. Juni 1987* (Berlin: 2007).
- James G. Wilson, *The Triumph of Improvisation. Gorbachev's Adaptability, Reagan's Engagement, and the End of the Cold War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: 2014).

Photo Credits

- BStU, MfS, HA III, Fo, no. 126 p. 46: Image 66.
- Bundesstiftung Aufarbeitung, Harald Schmitt photo collection
p. 26: Bild Schmitt_368.
- Landesarchiv Berlin, F Rep. 290 p. 13: no. 0209202 (Karl-Heinz Schubert); p. 15: no. 0210949; p. 23: no. 0242327 (Wolfgang Albrecht); p. 30: no. 0242208 (Ludwig Ehlers); p. 39: no. 0014170_C (Edmund Kasperski); p. 43: no. 0014259_C (Edmund Kasperski).
- Landesarchiv Berlin, F Rep. 290-02-15 p. 27: no. 0257449 (Günter Schneider); p. 29: no. 0257438 (Günter Schneider).
- ullstein bild p. 7: no. 6302988468 (Heritage Images/Keystone Archives); p. 10: no. 00147071 (Stark-Otto); p. 17: no. 00061937; p. 33: no. 00008014 (Sven Simon); p. 41: no. 00049139 (Shachman); p. 49: no. 00362667 (dpa).
- Front cover US President Ronald Reagan (center) with the Governing Mayor of Berlin, Richard von Weizsäcker (left), and Chancellor Helmut Schmidt (right) at Checkpoint Charlie, June 11, 1982. ullstein bild (no. 00005406, Stark-Otto).
- Back cover left Ronald and Nancy Reagan at Checkpoint Charlie, December 1, 1978. ullstein bild (no. 00061937).
- Back cover right Police action on Winterfeldstrasse in Schöneberg, June 11, 1982. Landesarchiv Berlin, F Rep. 290-02-15 (no. 0257438, Günter Schneider).

The author

Jens Schöne, Dr. phil., born in 1970, studied Modern and Contemporary History as well as English and American Studies at the Humboldt University of Berlin. In 2004 he obtained his doctorate from the Free University of Berlin. Since 2007 he has been Deputy Commissioner for the Reappraisal of the SED Dictatorship in Berlin and a lecturer at the Humboldt University. He has written numerous publications on German history in the twentieth century, especially on the economic and social history of the GDR and the history of Berlin.

The translator

Jessica Wood completed her PhD in German Studies and Italian Studies at the University of Birmingham in 2016. Since then, she has worked as a freelance translator with a particular interest in twentieth-century European literature and history. She translates from German and Italian into English. She also works part-time for an MP in the UK.

STIFTUNG
ERNST-REUTER-ARCHIV

The Ernst Reuter Archives Foundation was founded on March 26, 2010. It is dedicated to the memory of the first Governing Mayor of Berlin, Ernst Reuter (1889–1953). He shaped the history of Berlin and Germany after the Second World War like no other figure. His role as the most important voice for freedom, democracy, and self-determination during the Soviet blockade in 1948/49 is legendary. Until his death in September 1953, Ernst Reuter did everything in his power to ensure that the interests of West Berlin and the people on the eastern side of the “Iron Curtain” were given due consideration in the political life of the Federal Republic of Germany.

At the same time, the Foundation’s work goes beyond the historical figure of Ernst Reuter, engaging in broader academic research within the field of contemporary history. Open to modern questions and interdisciplinary approaches, the Ernst Reuter Archives Foundation seeks new perspectives on the history of Berlin and Germany in the twentieth century.

More information can be found at www.ernst-reuter.org.



His call for Mikhail Gorbachev to tear down the Berlin Wall earned Ronald Reagan enormous and lasting popularity. But 1987 was by no means the first time that Reagan had set foot in the divided city. Indeed, he had previously traveled there in 1978 and 1982, and his appearance in 1987 would not be his last.

In this essay, Jens Schöne explores the visits of the 40th President of the United States to Berlin. The historian investigates both the background and consequences of these events. Reagan's visit to East Berlin is analyzed just as critically as that of June 1982, which foreshadowed much of what was to cause global excitement five years later. It considers the mixed reactions among West Berlin's population as well as the East German Ministry for State Security, which naturally took a keen interest in events and attempted to influence them.

ISBN 978-3-95410-360-7



9 783954 103607

8,- € | D

STIFTUNG

ERNST-REUTER-ARCHIV



Berliner Beauftragter
zur Aufarbeitung
der SED-Diktatur

www.bebra-wissenschaft.de