Just when we thought we knew everything about the Cold War détente and Willy Brandt’s Ostpolitik one of the most distinguished experts on that topic surprises us with a small but pregnant revision. Based on the kind of meticulous research and sharp argumentation we have come to expect from the work of Noel Cary, he proves—certainly to the satisfaction of this reviewer—that Brandt’s 1963 challenge to East Berlin to join him in a common application for the summer Olympics of 1968, was more than another classic Cold War political propaganda stance, as had generally been assumed. In fact, records of the German national Olympic Committee show that the initiative for an all-Berlin Olympics did not originate with the West Berlin Mayor at all, but with the West German Olympic leadership. Moreover, when the long-term head of the German sports Association, Willi Daume, suggested the idea to the mayor, the latter greeted it not as a chance for propaganda at all. Instead, the idea fit right into the Brandt team’s ongoing search for increasingly scarce opportunities for technical cooperation with the East that would gradually ‘make the Wall porous,’ as the West Berlin leadership cautiously put it in the polarized atmosphere of the Cold War.

This finding that the Olympic proposal was not just a propaganda move is, of course, hardly earthshaking by itself, but it has important implications. The first and most obvious is a reminder that even at a time when international relations were so massively dominated by political theater as Professor Andreas Daum has described it so graphically in his wonderful book *Kennedy in Berlin*,1 there was space for carefully considered diplomacy. In fact it was precisely in Berlin, at the very hotspot of confrontation in the Cold War, where the pressure on the political leadership was strongest to find ways of

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cooperation. This means that the political culture of West Berlin was always marked by a combination of extraordinary ideological commitment to anti-communism, as indicated by the massive political demonstrations regularly attended by a third and more of the population, on one hand, and a sense of mission that Berlin was destined to act as a bridge between East and West. These combined missions of the Frontstadt advanced fortress against communism and almost continuous technical contacts behind the scenes between East and West of all the West Berlin governments from mayors Ernst Reuter to Walter Momper.

To some extent this swinging pendulum between confrontation and détente was characteristic for the Cold War. The brinkmanship, as John Foster Dulles named it, which again and again led the superpowers’ ideological warfare to the abyss of nuclear war, frightened both sides into efforts of rapprochement. But this was felt most intensely and continuously in Berlin. Here it affected two leading statesmen with particular force, perhaps because they were especially vulnerable as charismatic personalities to the influence of the moods of enraptured audiences: John F. Kennedy and Willy Brandt. The latter testified in his memoirs how deeply the shock of the Wall, coupled with the apparent unconcern of the Americans, opened his eyes to the necessity of seeking technical solutions locally to soften the blow of the Wall. Kennedy absorbed and practiced the same vociferous commitment to the ideology of the Cold War and an equally strong advocacy of détente through local negotiation during his visit to Berlin in June 1963. He was moved to change the script of his ‘ich bin ein Berliner’ speech before the roaring crowds of the typical West Berlin demonstration to an ideological call against any compromise or even negotiation with the Communists. Only couple of hours later he earnestly appealed to his audience in the Free University auditorium to seek local contacts with the Communists to ease at least some of the pains caused by the Wall.

Cary’s findings significantly expand and enrich our understanding of this Cold War culture by showing the important role the world of sports played at such critical points as 1963, framed by Khrushchev’s visit to East Berlin with his invitation to Brandt, vetoed by his Christian Democratic coalition partner, and Kennedy’s triumphant visit. It is an important contribution to our understanding of the Cold War period at a time when it threatens to fade into an era of simple ideological confrontation swept aside by a brilliant Western/American victory. The article is beautifully written and a delight to read.


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