

*Die Insel. Eine Geschichte West-Berlins, 1948-1990.* By Wilfried Rott. Munich: C.H. Beck. 2009. 478 pp.

*Die Insel* is a comprehensive history of West Berlin, that unwanted by-product of the Cold War. Rott stresses the peculiar character of the Western half of the German capital after the Second World War, presenting West Berlin as a ‘third Germany’: related to and dependent on, but also separate from the two German states. An independent study of West Berlin is indispensable, he argues, not least because its unique history has been neglected by historians and the public alike. Evidently, we are dealing with a passionate West Berliner who feels uneasy about the attention the former GDR, including East Berlin, has received since the unification of Germany, which has increasingly threatened to make the ‘identity’ of West Berlin appear irrelevant. Rott is not a historian by profession, but a former journalist; before his retirement he worked as a correspondent for the *Sender Freies Berlin*, and in this role closely observed the development of his home city. Rott’s views have been significantly influenced by the numerous interviews he has conducted with historical figures such as the former mayors of West Berlin Klaus Schütz, Dietrich Stobbe, Richard von Weizsäcker, Eberhard Diepgen and Walter Momper. His study, however, represents more than the semi-autobiographical memoirs of an eye-witness. In contrast to many other historical books written by journalists, Rott’s study meets the requirements of an academic history. It is based on published documents, press articles, and specialised literature and represents the most comprehensive study of West Berlin currently available.

Rott is at his best when writing the political history of the city, which he presents mainly through the prism of the city's *Regierende Bürgermeister*. The chapters on Ernst Reuter and Willy Brandt, which deal with the prolonged years of crisis between the airlift and the building of the wall, are particularly compelling. For the period of the Cold War, when the 'Berlin problem' was constantly on the international agenda and secured the attention of the world powers, Rott's plea for a separate history of West Berlin is most convincing. His rather old-fashioned, person-centred approach to political history provides his text with a natural structure and results in an accessible, sometimes entertaining read. At the same time, his approach shows the limits of his understanding of history. The history of West-Berlin is largely reduced to political history and the history of its political leaders, their personal relations and rivalries, and the plotting and intriguing behind the scenes. The larger cultural, social and economic developments within the city remain out of focus and merely provide the background for the political stage. When not concentrating on politics and politicians, Rott writes about the city's high culture. We do learn a great deal about the development West Berlin's lavishly funded theatres and opera houses and their respective directors and conductors. Rott also pays due attention to the student 'revolution' in the late 1960s, which announced the emergence of an alternative counter-culture in the following decades, and charts the changing face of the city as a centre of immigration, despite its continuing de-industrialisation. On occasion, he comes up with a fortunate formulation that shows him as an able author who combines literary and analytical talent. He describes Rudi Dutschke's manner of talking, for instance, as displaying the 'breathlessness of the student revolt, transformed into

speech' (p. 252). However, how the developments of the 1970s and 1980s changed the face of the city remains underexplored. Even though David Bowie and Iggy Pop are mentioned briefly, popular culture and everyday life are not Rott's major concern. We also learn little about traditional topics of urban history: the development of local transportation, public housing, architecture, public health, education, and other important aspects of the city's infrastructure are mentioned in passing, but not explored in detail.

Rott complains about the increasing 'provincialism' that characterised West Berlin in the 1970s and 1980s. He describes the arrogance of the West Berlin political elites, whose increasing incompetence and involvement in embarrassing financial scandals damaged the image of the city considerably. Indeed, Rott's history of the city is a story of decline, of its loss of national and international importance. From this perspective, the fall of the wall in 1989 and the subsequent reunification of the two parts of Berlin happened just in time to cover up the desperate situation of West Berlin. Rott stresses the importance of the peculiar 'island in a sea of communism' for German unification; without it, unification would have happened differently, and certainly more slowly: 'Nur hier konnte sich die plötzlich gewonnene, fast im Handstreich genommene Reisefreiheit schlagartig realisieren, denn nur hier lag für die DDR-Bürger das andere Deutschland vor der Haustür, genügte eine S-Bahnfahrt, oft der Fußweg, um die Grenze zu überschreiten' (p. 415). On the whole, Rott has produced a readable, traditional political and cultural history of a unique half-city. Despite its shortcomings, the book would deserve an English translation.