

Rainer Eppelmann talks about the Enquete Commission on the SED Dictatorship (May 3, 1992)

Abstract

In an interview with the national news radio station Deutschlandfunk, the chairman of the Enquete Commission, former East German dissident Rainer Eppelmann, discusses the challenge of engaging in a public discussion of the history of the East German dictatorship. He also addresses the ambivalent role of the Protestant church and the importance of maintaining open access to Stasi files.

Source

Interview with Rainer Eppelmann (Bundestag Member/CDU), Chairman of the Enquete Commission for the “Reappraisal of the History and Consequences of the SED Dictatorship”

Deutschlandfunk: Mr. Eppelmann, forgive and forget are not the worst Christian virtues. You are now heading the Enquete Commission of the Bundestag on the reappraisal of the SED dictatorship? Don't people have other, very different worries?

Eppelmann: People do have other worries. But the question “What was going on during these last forty years, especially with this [Ministry of] State Security?” has been filling the first, second, and third pages of all the newspapers since the beginning of this year. There's hardly a newscast, hardly a television broadcast on current issues in Germany without a news item on this topic. That's to say, the question of what really happened there, what kind of pressure was exerted on me by this State Security, either directly or through the school, the workplace, the sports club, the cultural association, or the writers' association – that's a question that preoccupies many people in East Germany. Fortunately not all of them. But many.

Deutschlandfunk: The Commission has already established focal points for its work. Working groups have been set up. A comprehensive concept is supposed to be in place by May 20. How will you work, with whom will you work, when do you want to have results?

Eppelmann: It has already become apparent that we will have to form a whole host of working groups, each of which will include a few members of the Commission. [...] We want to start with education in the GDR. What influence did it have on people, on youth growing up, on their behavior, on their basic attitudes, on the way in which they spoke or where they kept silent? How were adults affected when they sent their children to the Young Pioneers, as beginning learners, even though they knew that this was essentially the children's organization of the SED, and not all of them liked this. They did it out of love for their children or out of fear for their children and their future. This needs to be thought about and discussed.

A second group will deal with the state of individual archives, for example, the SED archive, the State Security archive, the archive of the Politburo, of the block parties; it will have to ask what, for example, was destroyed in these archives in the fall of 1989 or the spring of 1990, and for what reasons? What were the motives? A third group will deal with the structure and workings of the [Ministry of] State Security, in an effort to arrive at evaluation criteria. I'll venture to mention at least two other areas that I believe will certainly play a large role in our commission: the whole area of the economy and the area of culture,

sports, and churches. It's clear to us, and we're also in unanimous agreement, that we can't reappraise, can't probe every area that has something to do with GDR history. Therefore, we'll have to identify individual focal points in the hopes of actually coming up with results. And it's important that this becomes clear: this is about all the people. It would be totally disastrous if we were unable to avoid the impression that we were only talking about Erich Honecker and Bärbel Bohley for two-and-a-half years. We have to talk about the lives of the 16 million [East Germans] and also about the behavior of the 60 million, meaning the West Germans, at least where their actions or inaction had a direct or indirect influence on living conditions in the GDR or on the behavior of those living there, both those who governed and those who were governed. Whether in the end there'll be an interim report, a partial report, or a final report – I don't think anyone can tell you at this time.

Deutschlandfunk: Mr. Eppelmann, a "Forum for Education and Renewal" initiated largely by members of the former GDR civil rights movement was founded in Leipzig in March. Is this competition or rather a supplement?

Eppelmann: Both, and in my view the two are not mutually exclusive. A very meaningful supplement, but at the same time competition that will put pressure on us: Don't take your work too lightly, otherwise they'll show you up. The Enquete Commission of the German Bundestag is the parliamentarians' response to the question that is generally asked: How can one try to work through GDR history? A question that, in my mind, every former GDR citizen should grapple with. Therefore, I would really like to encourage, even if I don't know what I'm instigating here, as many former GDR citizens as possible to think about their lives, write these thoughts down, then perhaps turn them into a letter or a report and to send this off so we can make note of it. We have to rely on such forms of cooperation with as many [partners] as possible, that is, with the Leipzig Forum, say, but also with the Domaschk Archive in Berlin, for example, or on what is called victim-perpetrator dialogue.

Deutschlandfunk: Mr. Eppelmann, you yourself come from the church opposition of the GDR. You tangled with the state as early as the beginning of the eighties. If I am correctly informed, the church leadership often found this a bit irksome. Did the official church always act properly during GDR times?

Eppelmann: Most definitely it did not always act properly. The Protestant church is greatly committed to advocating the principle that councils can err, too. And surely that applies not only to Catholic councils, but to Protestant ones as well. I would like to answer the question first from human experience in general. Of course, I have to say that even the leadership of the Protestant church in the GDR made mistakes, because, for example, despite the separation of state and church – a principle recognized by both state and church – we had a whole series of privileges that other organizations did not. We could ring bells – perhaps that's still relatively minor – we had the possibility of obtaining money through kindred spirits in the Federal Republic (that is from Protestant Christians in the Federal Republic) in order to rebuild churches, to establish charitable institutions and hospitals, or upgrade their equipment. We were human beings, who – at least those of us in leadership positions – were able to leave the GDR on official trips at a time when it was impossible for others. There were church leaders who had permanent visas. Thus they were able to travel to the West practically at any time.

Understandably enough, the church was always tempted to preserve these privileges for itself, not to risk them, not to lose them. If you then consider the most important privilege, that under the GDR's regulatory code on events, the church was the only organization that was not required to give notice of its religious services ahead of time – this was one reason why the abundance of peace groups in the GDR gathered under the roof of the Protestant church – then it is very, very understandable to me that we were repeatedly under pressure in that regard: let us preserve or even expand the few free spaces that we have. This effort, which I supported, of expanding free spaces, preserving them, was not just for the official church, but for the 5-6 million Christians, and also, to a growing extent, for others, too. But by now I can no longer escape the impression (and a look into my own files or those of others attests to this)

that in the effort – supported by me – to preserve and expand free spaces, some individuals repeatedly left inconvenient speakers or admonishers, and demonstrators, too, out in the cold, so to speak, or even betrayed them.

[...]

Deutschlandfunk: You once said that all citizens of the GDR were whores in some way or another, that all of you allowed yourselves to be used by the SED state. Was it impossible to stay politically-morally clean in the GDR under the conditions of real Socialism?

Eppelmann: That's a very complicated question. If by "staying clean" you're asking whether one could live in the GDR without making compromises, then I'd have to say: no, it was impossible. It's part of human life, part of life for people in the GDR as well as in the old Federal Republic, to recognize that not all of my visions, not all of my wishes, not all of my ideas will be fulfilled or can be realized. I must therefore consider what I would like to have alongside that which seems possible and then find a compromise. To me, that's not sordid in and of itself. I would not want to judge that as morally negative. For me, that applies only when the person who makes such a compromise does so at the expense of someone else and to his own advantage. That, I believe, was not necessary. There is for me, for example, a very decisive point at which I ask: Where is there actual guilt? Guilt that also requires expiation, where it's perhaps possible for forgiveness to follow, provided there's an admission of guilt. Probably not forgetting, we can't prescribe that, but forgiving. I concede to every person – for who, after all, wants to die a hero or a saint or a martyr? – that you have to make compromises if you don't want to live like Robinson Crusoe. Together with others, and this extends all the way into the family, that is, into the very community of those who claim to love each other – here, too, one must enter into compromises. But these compromises must not deprive others of their life opportunities.

Now I return to the topic at hand. In my opinion it was most definitely the right and the duty of the Protestant church to make compromises with the regime in the GDR, in order to preserve or even expand life opportunities, faith opportunities for Christians. But if that happened in a way that harmed individuals, that harmed others, then that compromise went beyond a limit that it really shouldn't have been allowed to cross. A limit that should be crossed least of all by a church that proclaims: Let us all be followers of this Jesus of Nazareth. For me, that would be another qualitative difference between all the others – all parties, organizations, and so on and so forth – and this church of Jesus Christ.

Deutschlandfunk: How do you assess the growing criticism, especially by Social Democrats, of the work of the Gauck Agency? There's talk of inquisition, of dime novels that are being written, of the reversal of the principles of a state under the rule of law.

Eppelmann: For me those are unacceptable statements, unacceptable because I've heard them only in recent weeks, only since the Minister President of Brandenburg, Manfred Stolpe, whom I otherwise highly esteem, came into the crosshairs, under observation. For those who spoke out within the SPD, it was apparently not a problem when the issue was Lothar de Maizière or Wolfgang Schnur, or the many – down to the kitchen helpers – who today can no longer work in the public sector in the state of Brandenburg because they cooperated with the Stasi. I mean there's a law – the Stasi Files Law – which all Bundestag members more or less knew was also going to be a risk, because we were moving into new territory. We have never done anything like it. But it was a law that was passed with the overwhelming majority of the entire chamber. We said: It's clear to us that we are venturing into new territory, that there will be amendments to this law. But we're all of the political intent – even the PDS voted, I think, only by abstaining – that this part of GDR history must also be worked through. To suddenly arrive at a completely different opinion because a symbolic SPD figure and integration advocate has come under suspicion. [...] Not because of the Gauck files, but rather because of his own conduct. It's my sense that if one wants to criticize something, one should criticize Manfred Stolpe and not the files. Of course, the files

must also be seen for what they are. That's something Mr. Gauck repeatedly points out. They're not the Bible; they're not the eternal truth. Instead, they're reports from a very specific perspective about incidents, events, conversations, meetings that took place. From everything we've seen so far, one must be extremely careful when it comes to assessing these files or to the assessment that is in the files, because it was of course always biased. But I know my file. There's not a single example where it was claimed that such and such happened, when nothing actually happened in reality; instead, it's always accurate. There would be a matter, an event, that I felt was very good, very successful, and very helpful for many people, and the file would say something like: attack against the state, counterrevolutionary affair. But it would never say that on this or that day an event took place that did not in fact take place.

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Source: "Interview mit Rainer Eppelmann (MdB/CDU), Vorsitzender der Enquete Kommission des deutschen Bundestages 'Aufarbeitung der Geschichte und Folgen der SED-Diktatur in Deutschland'", *Deutschland Archiv* 25, no. 8 (1992), pp. 668–671.

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