

Chancellor Konrad Adenauer on the Federal Republic's Attitude towards the Jews (September 27, 1951)

Abstract

In this speech before the Federal Parliament Adenauer responded to criticism of his government's policies and to the question whether it took adequate account of past German crimes. In line with mainstream politics of the time, he also claimed that the majority of Germans had not participated in the crimes of the Hitler regime and had also tried to help their Jewish neighbors. While material restitution had begun, there was also the necessity of caring for the millions of war victims and refugees. Still, he was open to negotiations with representatives of Israel, which later culminated in an agreement forged by Adenauer and Israeli prime minister Ben Gurion. When this agreement was discussed in Adenauer's cabinet there was some opposition by ministers who wanted to give priority to the support of destitute West Germans. The chancellor pushed the decision through with the support of economics minister Ludwig Erhard. Adenauer's commitment must also be seen against the background of the refusal of the East German government to offer any restitution at all. In the GDR leadership's view of the Hitler dictatorship and its crimes, the Nazis had been brought to power in 1933 by the monopoly capitalists in order to stave off a Communist revolution and seizure of power. Meanwhile the German population and its working-class in particular had themselves been the victims of this regime of terror and therefore had no responsibility for what happened between 1933 and 1945. The long-term consequences of these divergent attitudes and policies emerged after the collapse of East Germany in 1989/90 when it became clear that the Nazi past was an issue that would burden German politics for decades to come.

Source

Of late, the world public opinion has repeatedly been concerned with the attitude of the Federal Republic of Germany towards the Jews. Here and there doubts have arisen as to whether our new policy is guided, in regard to this important question, by principles which take into account the terrible crimes of the past epoch and which place the relationship between the Jews and the German people on a new and healthy footing.

The attitude of the Federal Republic of Germany to its Jewish citizens is clearly defined through the Basic Law. [...] These legal norms are the law of the land and oblige every German citizen, and especially every state official, to reject any form of racial discrimination. In the same spirit, the German government has also signed the Human Rights Convention adopted by the Council of Europe and has pledged itself to the realization of the legal concepts laid down in this Convention.

[...] The German government, and with it the majority of the German people, are conscious of the immeasurable sorrow that was brought upon the Jewish people in Germany and in the occupied territories during the period of National Socialism. There was a predominant majority of German people who abhorred the crimes committed against the Jews and did not take part in them. There were many Germans during the time of National Socialism who, at their own risk, showed their willingness to help their Jewish compatriots for religious reasons, in a conflict of conscience, and out of shame because the German name had been disgraced. The unmentionable crimes committed in the name of the German people demand a moral and material restitution. This includes both the damages inflicted on individual Jewish people and on Jewish property for which the individuals entitled to restitution no longer exist. The first steps have been taken in this area. Much more, however, remains to be done. The German government will see to a quick settlement concerning the restitution legislation and its fair

implementation. A part of the identifiable Jewish property has been returned; additional restorations will follow. [...]

The Federal Government is ready, together with representatives of Jewish interests and the State of Israel, which received so many homeless Jewish refugees to bring about a solution of the material restitution problems and thereby to prepare the way to a moral adjustment of this infinite sorrow. The German government is deeply convinced that the spirit of true humanity must be revived and made fruitful again. [...]

Source of original German text: 1. Deutscher Bundestag, 165. Sitzung vom 27.9.1951, S. 6697 f; abgedruckt in: *Die Auswärtige Politik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, herausgegeben vom Auswärtigen Amt unter Mitwirkung eines wissenschaftlichen Beirats, Verlag Wissenschaft und Politik, Köln, 1972, pp. 179–81.

Source of English translation: Carl-Christoph Schweitzer et al., eds., *Politics and Government in Germany, 1944–1994*. Providence-Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1995, pp. 122–23.

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