

Kurt Schumacher's Message to Voters before the First Postwar Elections in West Germany (August 12, 1949)

Abstract

Two days before the first postwar elections in the Western Zones, SPD chairman Kurt Schumacher appealed to voters in this radio broadcast. He emphasized the great significance of this election which was held in all three Western occupation zones and thus signaled the desire for Germany's unification. At the same time, he explained the importance this election had for relations between Germany and France. Although the SPD received the most votes in the Bundestag election with 29.2%, the government was formed under Konrad Adenauer from a coalition of CDU, FDP and DP. This marked the beginning of a long phase of political opposition for the SPD, which was to last until 1966.

Source

/Schumacher: August 14 is the first political election day in Germany. It will have its significance both internally and externally, it will determine the course of German politics, but it will also determine the opinion of Germany abroad. But August 14 is also the first day on which the inhabitants of the French-occupied zone form a political will together with the inhabitants of the Bizone. This is of the utmost importance, because West Germany, a united, balanced and stable West Germany, is the only way to find solid ground for the struggle for German unity. West Germany must be so politically free and democratic both internally and externally, must have such a quality of social justice and goodwill that it has a magnetic effect on the German East.

The relationship between France and Germany is certainly, politically and perhaps even more so humanly, the core of the reorganization of Europe. There is no point in exhausting ourselves in assertions of mutual goodwill. This good will exists among the vast majority of the German people, and this good will will also prevail among the majority of the French, according to the tradition of the French spirit. But opposing views clash and there are points of difference, and I think it is better to fight through these points of difference in a factual debate than to ignore them and allow feelings of antipathy and mistrust to develop on both sides. More and better things will come out of the debate on differences of opinion if they are based on the good will to reach agreement, than from mere empty declamations.

Well, the German constitution was created in Bonn. In Bonn, there were disputes between the German parties and thus also disputes between individual German parties and individual occupying powers. Let's put our cards on the table: the principle of federalism is a term that everyone in Germany today, and apparently also abroad, understands differently. We can argue about this federalism and there is no doubt that the German Federal Republic will be more federal than the Weimar Republic, for example. Practice must prove it, but it is not possible and not a good thing to use the principle of federalism as a weapon against Germany in order to keep it as politically impotent as possible. The German people as a whole, excluding some eventual separatists, would not be able to agree to a situation of a Confederation of the Rhine and would perceive the attempt to practice this principle as a hostile attitude against the German people. We need a strong confederation, we want the Länder to be as federal as possible, but we must have the central power as strong as necessary. This central authority has the task of bearing the internal and external burdens of the aftermath of the war, which individual states cannot and should not do. And perhaps the French government and the French people will also consider that a principle of constitutional law that they consider completely unsuitable for the government of their own country should not be enforced for the regulation of the constitutional relations of another country.

It was good and right of the German Social Democrats to assert the powers of the federal government in

Bonn, even at the risk of a major, embarrassing confrontation with the occupying powers. Now Bonn at least has the confidence of the well-intentioned Germans. A West Germany of 11 fatherlands, a West Germany in the style of the Allied intervention of March 2 of this year, for example, would not have the confidence of the Germans. And if German democracy is to prevail, if it is to fend off the totalitarian onslaught from the East and keep neo-nationalism and neo-fascism in Germany at bay, it must have the confidence of the people when it comes to the possibility of developing a better future. Now, especially in the French zone, the concept of this overemphasized federalism seems to me to be completely inappropriate. The three Länder of the French zone are Länder without history, they are artificial entities. All three Länder are politically and economically unviable, all three Länder still have a strong historical and economic cohesion with other German Länder within the German framework. And the absurdity of this constitutional construction is best demonstrated by the economic policy and financial results of their economies. None of these Länder is capable of maintaining itself. Even more than other German Länder, each of them has the greatest difficulties with the costs of occupation. And the costs of occupation are everywhere in constant competition with social costs, and no German can be blamed if they consider social costs to be more important and more urgent than excessive occupation costs. All German states, and the states of the French zone in particular are the best example of this, have no prospect of a real future unless financial sovereignty lies with the federal government. And the financial sovereignty of the federal government in terms of aid will probably not be claimed more by any German state than by the three states of the French zone.

Financial equalization alone can save these states for the time being, but all states must be subjected to a new division and reconstruction under German constitutional law. It serves no purpose and undoubtedly makes no contribution to European pacification if the Länder in the French zone have to live under particularly difficult economic, financial and social conditions.

These matters must be discussed and resolved, and that is why the creation of the Trizone is a step forward for the inhabitants of these three countries. A step forward which, if it is supported by the favor and goodwill of the occupying power, can be no less significant in a positive sense for France than for Germany.

Perhaps the word "German unity" does not ring sweetly in the ears of the French, given the historical experiences of the last 80 years. But without German unity, there can be no generation of good will for European cooperation. It is not possible in the long term to withhold unity from a single large nation in the world and grant it to all others. This withholding must be eliminated from the entire world. The German population, the entire German people, must be given the impression that it is not a fictitious security but a real democracy and a real European attitude that are the motive behind Allied, and above all French, policy on the continent.

The German people, especially in these weakened areas, now have new problems with the unification with the Bizone, which will not be any easier in the long run. These new problems consist in the increase of purchasing power in the closest connection with the working masses of the Bizone. The result of Frankfurt's economic policy, i.e. the party dictatorship of the Christian Democrats, the Free Democrats and the bourgeois splinter parties, is a weakening of purchasing power to around 60% of the purchasing power of 1936. The result is rising unemployment with a declining number of job vacancies and a shrinking national income. We in West Germany are now covered with a plethora of promises from within and without. And the promises of the Frankfurt Economic Council regarding a favorable development of the economy, the elimination of unemployment, an increase in mass purchasing power and a strengthening of credit inflows have so far all been mere promises, false prophecies and deception. And that is why the German people, especially in the Länder of the French zone, will have to affirm the socialist consequences of democracy in Europe more strongly than before and reinforce them with their vote. If the Germans, in order to develop a new state of European reconciliation, rightly reject a policy of permanent intervention by the occupying powers, then they also reject an intervention of a cultural-political nature, which from the outset seeks to exploit the confessional situation in West Germany for power politics without regard for a Germany of national unity. We will achieve peace and a settlement with the claims of the Church, but to get there we must first have established a stable state in which the

decisive factor is the German democratic citizen, the citizen with the good will for European cooperation.

Source: SWR2 Archivrado

<https://www.ardaudiothek.de/episode/archivradio-geschichte-im-original/wahlauf-ruf-des-spd-vorsitzen-den-kurt-schumacher/swr2/65843274/>

Recommended Citation: Kurt Schumacher's Message to Voters before the First Postwar Elections in West Germany (August 12, 1949), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/occupation-and-the-emergence-of-two-states-1945-1961/ghdi:audio-5011>> [May 03, 2024].