

Letter from Eisenhower to Adenauer on the Outcome of the Washington Conference (July 25, 1953)

Abstract

Five weeks after the June 17th workers' uprising in East Germany, U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower wrote to Chancellor Konrad Adenauer to reaffirm the position of the Western powers – the precondition for solving the German question was the holding of free elections throughout Germany and the subsequent formation of a unified German government. Eisenhower made clear that, for him, the Western integration of the FRG posed no obstacle to reunification; rather, he felt that it would strengthen the superiority of the Western political and economic system and lead to the dissolution of Communist rule in East Germany.

Source

During the development of the conversations between the U.S. Secretary of State and the Foreign Ministers of Great Britain and France, it occurred to me that it might be helpful if I were to write you a letter in amplification of the thoughts so tightly compressed in the final communiqué.

It seems to me that certain definite patterns are emerging from the situation in East Germany and the Eastern Europe satellite countries – patterns which will unquestionably have a profound effect upon the future, including the proposed meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the Four Powers.

I think, therefore, that it will be useful for me to share my thoughts with you in some detail at this time.

Great historical developments, such as the recent Berlin and East German anti-Communist demonstrations, rarely have single roots. Nevertheless, I am quite certain that future historians, in their analysis of the causes which will have brought about the disintegration of the Communist empire, will single out those brave East Germans who dared to rise against the canons of tyranny with nothing but their bare hands and their stout hearts, as a root cause. I think also that those same historians will record your own extraordinary steadfastness in the cause of European peace and freedom over many, many years.

In analyzing these recent developments, there appear to be five points of greatest significance.

First, this eruption against Communist oppression was spontaneous. I know that I need not go into any elaborate denial with you of the fantastic explanation put out by Moscow that the uprising was caused by American provocateurs. No provocateur of any nationality can persuade human beings to stand up in front of rumbling tanks with sticks and stones. Such action comes from the heart and not from any foreign purse.

Second, this uprising was not just a momentary flash of desperation. The continuing news of disorders in Eastern Germany indicates a fundamental and lasting determination to be fully and finally free, despite long years of stern Sovietization.

Third, nowhere were the rioters “bourgeois reactionaries” or “capitalist warmongers.” They were workers. Therefore, the martyrs who fell before Russian Communist guns were the very same workers in whose name the Kremlin has falsely and cynically built their empire of oppression, their far-flung “workers' paradise.”

Fourth, the fact of the uprising, the conduct of the German Communist leaders during the event and their actions since the event, all indicate the complete political bankruptcy of the SED [*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*].

Fifth, and to me of utmost significance, when the riots developed in the Russian sector of Berlin, the workers' chant was, "We want free elections." In this phrase, the people clearly and simply summed up their yearning for the alleviation of their grievances and sufferings.

The combination of these five facts actually forms the background for that portion of the July 15 [14] Foreign Ministers' communiqué dealing with German unification and free elections. And the communiqué itself, as you know, is actually the diplomatic confirmation of your own earlier statements, of my June 26 cable to you, and most important, of the resolution of the German Bundestag of June 10.

For the past many months there have been endless arguments and debates on both sides of the Atlantic over the respective priorities of such words and phrases as "unification," "peace treaty," "free elections," "withdrawal of occupation troops," etc.

It has always seemed to me – and these recent events, to me at least, clearly confirm the thought – that there can be no solution without free elections and the formation of a free all-German Government, leading to unification. From that point on can flow a logical, orderly sequence of events, culminating in an honorable peace treaty and the re-emergence of a new united German Republic, dedicated to the welfare of its own people, as a friendly and peaceful member of the European family of nations.

To this first step of free elections, the Government of the United States will continue to lend the full force of its political, diplomatic, and moral support.

There are sincere people in Germany, in the nations of Western Europe, and even in my own country, who have come to believe that free elections, and therefore the unification of Germany, contradict and possibly exclude the concept of the European Defense Community which has been ratified by both your Houses of Parliament and is now before your Constitutional Court. I do not and have never accepted this theory that the EDC and unification of Germany are mutually exclusive. Quite the contrary.

As the three Foreign Ministers stated at the conclusion of their recent meeting in Washington, since the European community corresponds to the lasting needs of its members and their people for peace, security, and welfare, it is looked upon as necessary in itself and not linked up with existing international tensions.

It has long been my conviction that the strengthening of the Federal Republic, through adoption of the EDC, the contractual agreements and further progress in the integration of Western Europe, can only enhance the prospects for the peaceful unification of Germany, by increasing the attractive power of this prosperous Western Germany vis-à-vis the Soviet Zone, an attractive power which has already been demonstrated by the steady stream of refugees in recent months, as well as the demonstrations which began on June 17. This increasing contrast between Western and Eastern Germany, the latter with its bankrupt regime and impoverished economy, will in the long run produce conditions which should make possible the liquidation of the present Communist dictatorship and of the Soviet occupation.

While a future all-German Government must obviously be free to choose the degree to which it wishes to enter into defensive and other arrangements compatible with the principles of the United Nations, I can hardly imagine that it would seek the path of complete and premature disarmament in the presence of other nations still heavily armed. I believe this is a matter worthy of serious attention. Those who in Germany believe they can suggest an easy, safe solution through defenseless neutralization should carefully ponder the true wisdom and safety of such a course.

Speaking for America, and I believe the rest of the free world shares this view, I can say that there has been enough bloodshed and enough misery and enough destruction in the past 50 years to deter any people or any Government of the West from any ideas of military aggression. But the peace we all so dearly seek cannot be maintained through weakness. EDC will be the simplest, most unequivocal, and most self-evident demonstration of strength for peace.

No one can foretell what the unfolding months will bring, but it can certainly be said that the workers of Berlin's Soviet Sector and the workers of East Germany, with the workers of Czechoslovakia, have started something that will have an important place on the pages of history. May the concluding chapter of that history record the reemergence of freedom, of peace, and of happiness.

Source: Letter from President Eisenhower to Chancellor Adenauer, on the East German Uprising (July 23, 1953); reprinted in *Documents on Germany, 1944–1959: Background Documents on Germany, 1944–1959, and a Chronology of Political Developments affecting Berlin, 1945–1956*. Washington, DC: General Printing Office, 1959, pp. 110–12.

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