

Wilhelm Pieck, “To the Returnees” (1946)

Abstract

The Soviet Union supported the SED through numerous measures – one of which was the release of some German prisoners of war into the Soviet occupation zone beginning in July 1946. In his words of welcome to returning prisoners of war, SED functionary Wilhelm Pieck spelled out Germany’s crimes during World War II and described the disastrous economic and social conditions that prevailed there at the time. With an eye toward the September 1946 communal elections, he also tried to solicit support for the SED program, which he characterized as anti-Fascist and focused on reconstruction.

Source

To the Returnees [*Heimkehrer*]^[1]!

Comrades! Friends!

On your long-awaited return to the homeland, I welcome you on behalf of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany, which was created from the union of the Social Democratic and Communist parties. With this, the fateful split of the working class was overcome and the unity of the workers’ movement restored. Unfortunately, this only applies to the Soviet occupation zone for now, and not to the other parts of Germany. But that will come.

It is thanks to the Socialist Unity Party of Germany and the great good will of the Soviet military administration that we were able to carry out the first large transports of returnees. For the time being, 120,000 prisoners of war are supposed to return to the homeland from the Soviet Union. We will continue striving so that the others will also have the opportunity to do so very soon. I share in your happiness over the fact that you will not be kept in quarantine camps much longer, but will return to your families back home as quickly as possible.

With your entry into camp Gronefelde, you are once again free persons. It is my wish that you find your family members, your wives and children, your parents and siblings, in good health. We from the party will do everything to help you overcome existing difficulties. Our party organizations everywhere are prepared to help you and your family members as best they can. On your return, I wish you the best for the time ahead. We have instructed our organizations to make sure the bureaucracy sees to it that returnees are given preference in police registration, food-ration cards, and other forms of aid. Still, there will surely be various shortcomings, but you must lend a hand in remedying them.

You are coming back at a time when our nation is confronting important political decisions. For the first time in thirteen years, there are once again free elections for communal representation. The Socialist Unity Party of Germany endeavored to show the Soviet military administration that you, as returnees, are entitled to the full franchise, and was successful. It is your duty to seriously consider which party will get your vote. Many of you might say, “Leave us alone with politics; we have had plenty of bad experiences with it.” That is certainly true, but our nation now confronts a very great task. It must now decide what is to happen to Germany, how our economy shall be structured, how our communities and our state shall be democratically established, how our nation itself shall create guarantees for peace, for democracy, for the unity of Germany.

For this, the communal elections are of great importance. The issue is to create solid democratic

majorities, and the workers must assume the leadership of these majorities. For that, the SED is the most reliable of all the parties. And that is also why it must become the strongest party in the parliaments. The SED by no means claims a party monopoly, but it takes on the great responsibility of the democratic renewal of Germany.

You will find a different Germany upon your return. Many of you will find that your old homes, your workplaces, are mere heaps of rubble. With the war, the Hitler regime brought an enormous misery upon our nation. When it was already clear to the entire world that the war was lost, the Hitler gang kept it going and going – the last soldier, the last house was to be sacrificed to this madness.

And thus Hitler turned our homeland into a mound of rubble. Millions of Germans were driven by the Hitler regime to death on the battlefields and back at home. [...] Our children and women are malnourished, our economy is deformed. An enormous burden of debt has been imposed upon our nation; all the money from savings and loans and insurance was squandered in this war.

The German people have become a poor people, a people of beggars. In this war, Hitler gambled away a part of our country in the East, and there is a great danger that we will also lose the Ruhr and the Saar regions, that Germany will be divided into various states and its unity thereby destroyed.

It is a horrifying legacy that Hitler has left us. But we must not despair, we must work hard to get ourselves out of this misery and build a new Germany. For this, we are counting on the help of the Allied powers, who, in their decrees, have promised not to destroy Germany, but to help our people to rebuild its homeland and economy, and to also give it [our people] the possibility of being readmitted into the community of nations.

But to this end, we have to accomplish very serious tasks, the foremost being that we ourselves create guarantees that a war can never again be instigated by the German side. Not only must the war criminals and those responsible for the war be punished for their crimes, but the corporate potentates and large landowners must be completely stripped of their power as well. A start was made in the Soviet occupation zone through the land reform and the expropriation of the war criminals and active Nazi leaders. Beyond that, all Nazi leaders responsible for the great crimes against our people must be punished most severely and neutralized.

A word about those members of the liquidated Nazi party who became members of the party under coercion, or out of calculation, without participating in its crimes: the so-called nominal party comrades. The SED has advocated that no special measures be taken against these people, and that instead they be given the possibility of participating in our work of democratic rebuilding. But we tell them in no uncertain terms that they must prove through their work that they have made a serious break with Nazism.

Our most important task is to relieve the misery of our people and, above all, to get our economy moving again. But unlike in past times, this is no longer the task of the big capitalists; instead, it must be done with the full responsibility of the workers, the unions, and the works' councils. They must be assured of the decisive influence in this process. A large number of enterprises will be destroyed as former war enterprises or dismantled for reparations purposes. All the greater is our interest in developing our industry as a peace industry, and in using its production to satisfy the needs of our people.

First and foremost here is the concern for feeding our people, then rebuilding housing, procuring heating fuel, clothes, and shoes. That is especially urgent in order to ensure that our people are somewhat protected in the winter. But here, precisely, it is imperative that all men and women and youth participate in this great work of reconstruction and within the framework of the great national solidarity.

We appeal to all those who are of good will. We turn to the urban population and farmers, to begin and

accomplish this great work united in solidarity.

We turn especially to the women, because now, more than before, they are the majority of our nation and will participate in its working life. They must have much greater influence than before on the economic and political shape of the new Germany.

Young people, too, have a great responsibility for this work. We must develop all educational opportunities for youth and attend to their training and the better shaping of their future.

These are the great tasks that confront our nation today, and I appeal to you once more to participate, upon your return to the homeland, in their realization with full self-confidence and all your energy. Look around at home and join in life and work for a new, democratic, and peaceful Germany. I wish all of you a happy reunion with your families.

NOTES

[1] ⁸ More specifically, *Heimkehrer* are repatriated prisoners of war – trans.

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Translation: Thomas Dunlap

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