

Brandt's Visit to the GDR (March 23, 1970)

Abstract

The Erfurt meeting between Chancellor Willy Brandt and Willi Stoph, Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the GDR, marked the start of direct negotiations between the two German governments. According to the author of this article, these talks entailed both opportunities and risks for the SED regime.

Source

Where Would We Be

From the moment the West German head of government stepped onto the red carpet in Erfurt, at the very latest, the GDR was no longer anything special—no phenomenon, no zone, but instead just a country like all others. It was visited by someone who did not use quotation marks and who, through his mere presence, offered reverence to the GDR. His respect for the protocol, flags, hymns, and soldiers was a form of tribute.

It was indeed a “moment of truth,” as chief SED commentator Karl Eduard von Schnitzler said. A moment, certainly, in which the GDR regime, always assured of its own sovereignty, had this sovereignty affirmed by its German neighbor. It was a moment in which the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, once the mouthpiece of the proponents of Bonn's sole [right to] representation of Germany, discovered “two established, self-assured, normal countries” on German soil and wrote that it was “now irretrievably lost: state unity in the forms we are familiar with.”

Really: Never before in the two decades of German discord had the GDR come so close to achieving its goal of being fully recognized by Bonn, and thus being accepted internationally. But—and in this respect Erfurt may also have been a moment of truth—this state has also never been so directly confronted with the problem of how to avoid the risks that seem inevitable when, in a world of change, the fronts between East and West start to move.

Not that the GDR would start to totter if its citizens start calling the other Willy to come to the window, as happened in Erfurt. And not that the Soviet Union would lose its interest in the westernmost pillar of its empire and let it fall.

Rather, it is imponderables that constitute the risk: The question, for example, of the extent to which—with progressive détente—the self-interests of the brother nations in the socialist bloc could collide with the interests of the GDR; or the question of the extent to which that step out of protective isolation that accompanies contact with the Western world threatens to expose the GDR to undesirable foreign influences; and finally the question of how this development might influence not only the consciousness of the people in the GDR but also the thinking of the SED functionary corps.

Certainly not totally unaware of these—in the long term unavoidable—dangers, the GDR leadership was focused on one main goal that day in Erfurt and afterwards: full recognition of the GDR under international law by the Federal Republic, and thus the contractual safeguarding of the existing situation (the status quo) in Germany and Europe.

GDR Minister President Willi Stoph said on the evening after the meeting with Willy Brandt: “There is no getting around the establishment of normal, equal relations between our two countries on the basis of international law, the recognition of European borders, and the outcome of the Second World War.”

Walter Ulbricht, chairman of the Council of State of the GDR and head of the SED, on the following day in the Thuringian city of Suhl, said: “This is why the people of the German Democratic Republic urgently, and with total justification, demand of its state leadership that agreements on partial aspects of the normalization be assured by means of an internationally valid treaty of basic principles on equal, non-discriminatory relations.”

Not until such a treaty is concluded, according to Ulbricht, “will we without a doubt be willing to engage in discussion on some partial issues and find agreement with regard to many concerns.” It remains unclear, however, whether he interprets that the same way that Bonn would like to have it understood (ranging from humanitarian travel relief to a pan-German soccer tournament) or possibly raises the demand that Bonn should pay 100 billion marks compensation for the population loss caused by refugees leaving the GDR in the years before the Wall was built.

[...]

Source: “Wo wären wir,” *Der Spiegel* 13/1970, March 23, 1970, pp. 29–32. Available online at: <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/wo-waeren-wir-a-69e36b2e-0002-0001-0000-000045225714?context=issue>. Republished with permission.

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