

Change through Rapprochement (July 15, 1963)

Abstract

In the following speech at the Evangelical Academy in Tutzing, Egon Bahr emphasizes Germany's special role in overcoming the entrenched East-West conflict in Europe. He proposes a policy of stronger cooperation, particularly in economic affairs, with the goal of gradually dismantling the status quo. The speech signaled a change of course in the Social Democrats' policies towards East Germany and the communist states of Eastern Europe.

Source

Egon Bahr on July 15, 1963, at the Evangelical Academy in Tutzing

[...]

The American strategy for peace can also be defined by the formula that communist rule should be changed, not eliminated. The U.S. approach to improving East-West relations serves to overcome the status quo by not changing the status quo for the time being. This sounds paradoxical, but it opens up possibilities, whereas the previous policy of pressure and counter-pressure only led to a solidification of the status quo. The confidence that our world is the better one, the stronger one in the peaceful sense of the word, the one that will prevail, makes it conceivable to try to open up ourselves, to encourage the other side to do so, and to set aside previous ideas about liberation.

The question is whether this concept includes a special German responsibility. I believe this question needs to be answered affirmatively if we do not wish to exclude ourselves from further developments in East-West relations. Within this framework there are even certain tasks that only the Germans can fulfill, because we find ourselves in Europe in the unique position of being a divided people.

The first conclusion to be drawn from applying this strategy for peace to Germany is that the policy of all-or-nothing is out of the question. Either free elections or none at all, either all-German freedom of choice or a hard "no," either elections as the first step or rejection—all this is not only hopelessly antiquated and unreal, but also senseless in a strategy of peace. Today it is clear that reunification is not a one-time act that will be set in motion by a historic decision on a historic day at an historic conference, but rather a process involving many steps and many stages. If what Kennedy said is correct, that one must also recognize and take into account the interests of the other side, then it is certainly impossible for the Soviet Union to let the Eastern Zone be snatched away from it for the purpose of strengthening Western potential. The Zone must be transformed with the approval of the Soviets. [...]

If it is correct, and I believe it is, that the Zone cannot be wrested from the Soviet sphere of influence, then it follows that every policy aimed directly at toppling the regime over there is futile. This conclusion is excruciatingly uncomfortable and runs counter to our feelings, but it is logical. It means that changes and alterations coming from the current regime are the only ones that are attainable. It is an illusion to believe that economic troubles might lead to a collapse of the regime. [...]

The American president has promoted the approach that we should generate as much trade as possible with the Eastern Bloc countries without endangering our security. If one applies this approach to Germany, it opens up an unusually wide field. It would be good, at the outset, if we could define this field according to our capacities and limits. I think they exceed all known estimates. If it is correct that

intensifying East-West trade (with the qualification mentioned above) lies in the West's interest, and I believe it is correct, then it is also determinately in Germany's interest. We need not be persnickety [*pingelig*] about this, to use a well-known Cologne expression for a well-known attitude. The goal of a policy like this, of course, cannot be to blackmail the Zone, for no communist regime, and certainly not one as endangered as the one in the Zone, can let its character be changed by economic relations. But, after all, not even the Americans made this demand when they gave loans to Poland, and that is also not the purpose of the American desire for intensified trade with the East. Our concern right now is the people, and the exhaustion of every conceivable and responsible attempt to ease their situation. Material improvement would have to have a relaxing effect in the Zone. [...]

We have also said that the Wall is a sign of weakness. One might also say that it was a sign of the communist regime's anxiety and urge for self-preservation. The question is whether there might be opportunities to gradually move these thoroughly justifiable concerns far enough away from the regime that loosening the borders and the Wall becomes feasible, because the risk is tolerable. This is a policy that can be summarized by the formula: change through rapprochement.

I am firmly convinced that we have enough self-confidence to pursue a policy like this without illusions, a policy, moreover, that fits seamlessly into the Western concept of the strategy for peace, for otherwise we will have to wait for miracles, and that is no policy at all.

Source: Egon Bahr, "Wandel durch Annäherung," speech delivered on July 15, 1963, at the Evangelical Academy in Tutzing; reprinted in Bernhard Pollmann, ed., *Lesebuch zur deutschen Geschichte*, vol. 3, *Vom deutschen Reich bis zur Gegenwart* Dortmund, 1984, pp. 247–49. Republished with permission. Available online at:

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