Dialogue between the SPD and the SED (September 11, 1988)

Abstract

One year after the SPD and the SED issued a controversial joint declaration emphasizing both sides' resolution to dialogue and peaceful "competition," Erhard Eppler takes a critical look at its reception in both German states in an interview with *Deutschlandfunk* radio.

Source

Relations between the SPD and the SED. Interview with Dr. Erhard Eppler in *Deutschlandfunk* Radio by Karl Wilhelm Fricke

DLF: The subject of this interview is supposed to be relations between the SPD and the SED. The point of departure is the statement of principles that the SPD and the SED worked out together and published a year ago. To be more precise, it was the Basic Values Commission of the SPD and the Academy for the Social Sciences within the Central Committee of the SED. The title is "Conflicting Ideologies and Common Security." You, Mr. Eppler, were one of the main contributors to this paper. After the political experiences of the past year, would you sign it again today?

Eppler: If I think about it carefully, then, after a slight hesitation, I'd say yes. I would do it again, although some of the hopes that we linked to this paper have yet to be fulfilled.

DLF: The basic idea of the document, if I can put it in my own words, consists in the realization that peace in the nuclear age can no longer be achieved by arming against each other; rather, it can only come by making agreements with each other. Consequently, for both partners, the common struggle for peace also requires new forms of political exchange: a willingness for dialogue, a culture of ideological dispute, in which each side accepts the right of the other side to exist, and a capacity for peace and reform. My question is: haven't some remarks by leading ideologues and SED politicians, their retrospective reinterpretations, served to call this consensus fundamentally into question?

Eppler: Mr. Fricke, in just a few sentences you have in fact recapitulated the most important aspects of this paper. We were aware from the very outset that there were some points in this paper that would cause bellyaches for politically trained Marxist-Leninists. We can say that the Politburo of the SED approved this paper and had it published in *Neues Deutschland,* and that since then all kinds of interpretations have been made, some that we can accept as legitimate and some that we cannot accept as legitimate . . .

DLF: For example, that one remark by Kurt Hager . . .

Eppler: Yes, precisely the remark about the capacity for peace. It was probably intended better than it was received. We were not surprised that there were difficulties here and interpretations that went back and forth. My impression, especially with respect to interpretations, is that a lot is going on in the SED and that we'll probably have to wait another year or two to see what comes out of it. What actually unsettles me even more than the occasionally strained attempts at interpretation is the reduction of the paper in the media, in public perception in the GDR, namely, the reduction of it to the subject of peace.

Peace is ultimately the most important thing; everything else is subordinate to peace. None of that is wrong. But then of course other major topics don't get nearly enough attention: for example, the acknowledgment of the capacity for peace and reform, the right of both sides to exist, the linking of the external dialogue—for example, between SPD and SED, or between the SED and other political groups in the Federal Republic or in western Europe, on the one side—with the internal dialogue taking place at this moment in society both here and there. This does not mean that that part of the paper has been renounced, but evidently it is believed that it cannot be totally fulfilled at the present time. Good, we are relatively patient and perhaps should add, as regards peace policies and the willingness to work together constructively on security issues with the Western side, including the SPD, that we have not really experienced any disappointment, since things are progressing well in those areas in the GDR. The difficulty at the moment lies in the implementation of the paper [within the SED].

[…]

DLF: Does the change in relations between the SPD and the SED also include a change in the SPD's attitude toward the DKP [German Communist Party]? That would be logical.

Eppler: We also thought about that from the very beginning. I have to admit that over the course of last year I changed my opinion on this subject to some extent. I originally said that the SED is one of the governing parties in east-central Europe, that is, in the area of the Warsaw Pact. We are a democratic party in the Federal Republic of Germany. We wrote this paper at that level, not with some small party in the Federal Republic of Germany. I still would like to maintain that. But another problem came up. If we ask the SED, what about your internal dialogue with forces in the GDR that do not follow the SED line, and here I don't just mean the nonaligned parties but also churches or peace groups or environmental groups, whatever they have there, then we'll get the counter-question: What are your relations with the DKP? That is to say, don't you do the same thing, exclude some groups—in this case a very small one—from the internal dialogue? I think this counter-question is legitimate. I have basically learned that. That does not mean that we will now fraternize with the DKP, that we'll form some joint action-groups. But it must mean that we will not categorically exclude the DKP from the internal dialogue in our republic because then we would not be fulfilling the conditions of the paper ourselves.

DLF: Would you share the appraisal, Mr. Eppler, that the SPD-SED document is being discussed more in the GDR than in the Federal Republic, and I mean both within and beyond the SED; that expectations are connected with it, among the general public at least, and also in the rank and file of the SED?

Eppler: It is my experience that the enthusiasm with which this paper is being discussed in the GDR is almost shameful to citizens of the Federal Republic. And you are correct: this is happening both within and outside of the SED, and very few people in this republic have even registered it at all. I think it would be a lot easier to turn this paper into a decisive domestic issue in the GDR if that were also the case here.

DLF: You once referred to the document as marking the start of a system-opening dialogue. Do you feel that this expectation was fulfilled, or haven't experiences since the signing of the paper perhaps demonstrated just the opposite, that it is very difficult to discuss ideological contrasts and political differences of opinion with the SED, and that it is all too rashly rejected as intervention in the internal affairs of the GDR?

Eppler: I borrowed the formula of a system-opening dialogue from Federal President Richard von Weizsäcker, who spoke of a system-opening dialogue in reference to this paper. If I look back today, I have to say that, if the word "start" is underlined very heavily, then one could speak of the start of a system-opening dialogue but then really just the start.

Source: “Beziehungen zwischen SPD und SED. Interview mit Erhard Eppler”, *Deutschland Archiv* 21, no. 10 (1988), pp. 1126–29.

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