

Ransom for Political Prisoners (Retrospective Account, 2009)

Abstract

State Secretary Hans Otto Bräutigam, head of the West German diplomatic mission in East Berlin from 1982 to 1989, explains the rationale for (and the actual process of) receiving payments from West German governments in exchange for East German political prisoners. The interview also includes some personal reflections on Erich Honecker's policy goals in relation to West Germany.

Source

“Honecker Did Not Have Reunification in Mind”

Hans Otto Bräutigam, the former permanent representative of the FRG to the GDR, on his work in East Berlin

Interview: Hans-Jörg Heims

In the eyes of the SED functionaries, he was the “ambassador of the class enemy” in East Berlin. But for many East German citizens, the permanent representative of the Federal Republic was the point of contact for gaining freedom. After Günter Gaus and Klaus Bölling, Hans Otto Bräutigam headed the diplomatic mission from 1982 to January 1989. Bräutigam, 79, lives in Berlin.

SZ: Mr. Bräutigam, how did you experience August 13, 1961?

Bräutigam: At the time, I was working at the Institute for International Law in Heidelberg. The building of the Wall did not affect me personally since I had no relatives in the GDR. But politically this event touched me very deeply, as it did most West Germans. The division of Germany was cemented by it.

SZ: You were born in 1931, so you lived through the Second World War. Were you afraid of a new war at the moment when tanks moved into position again in the middle of Germany?

Bräutigam: Of course we asked ourselves the question: is the threat of war increasing now? But we soon realized that there must not be a war to resolve the German question. The goal of a new *Ostpolitik* had to be to normalize contact between people despite the Wall. Under the chancellorship of Willy Brandt, this path was then taken.

SZ: First and foremost, though, it was a business transaction: humanitarian relief in return for hard currency. Didn't the Federal Republic pay a high price when it ransomed [political] prisoners, for example?

Bräutigam: Once I put the question of ransoming prisoners to the former minister of Intra-German Relations, Egon Franke. His reaction was vehement. He said that he had spent six years in prison and a concentration camp during the Nazi dictatorship, and that no prisoner was ransomed at that time. It was a profound political-moral imperative for every federal government to do what was humanly possible to reunite families and to get political prisoners released.

SZ: How was it done?

Bräutigam: We went through the lawyer Wolfgang Vogel. When I visited him in his office from time to time, I took with me a list of cases that had become known to me personally. Mostly through information from people in the Church. Usually, cases were brought directly to the federal government. In addition, nearly every West German politician who visited Honecker in the eighties brought with him a list of emigration cases. These were then reviewed and a substantial number of them were approved.

SZ: Why was Vogel trusted?

Bräutigam: Vogel was an intermediary who always also had the legitimate demands of the West in mind. When he made promises, one could rely on them being kept. He tried hard even in difficult cases, and here it was advantageous that he had direct access to Honecker and those around him. But nobody could leave the country without the approval of the State Security.

SZ: Does that mean: if Vogel couldn't get there, then it didn't work at all?

Bräutigam: Then only massive political pressure helped.

SZ: Which meant: Bonn pays, and in return East Berlin let people go. Wouldn't it have been easier to fulfill the "Gera Demands" that Honecker formulated in 1980, that is, recognition of GDR citizenship, conversion of the permanent missions into embassies, and the demarcation of the Elbe border in the middle of the river.

Bräutigam: We were very close when it came to the Elbe border. But an agreement failed because of an objection from the Minister President of Lower Saxony, Ernst Albrecht. The issue of citizenship, on the other hand, was the crux of the German question. It would have been a grave mistake to give up citizenship for all Germans.

SZ: But wouldn't the GDR, like the other Eastern Bloc states, have [eventually] been undone by its economic problems, independent of whether its citizens possessed a citizenship recognized by the West?

Bräutigam: No one can answer the question of whether the GDR would have collapsed sooner without the financial support from the Federal Republic. In any case, the Federal Republic neither brought about the collapse of the GDR nor prolonged its existence.

SZ: You were close to Honecker in 1987, when, during his trip through the Federal Republic, he went to the Saarland and spoke completely unexpectedly of a border that need not divide but could rather unify. Did the head of the GDR state really want a different border?

Bräutigam: Honecker certainly did not have a unification in mind, at best a more humane border. For on this trip, and especially after the impression left by his visit to his Saarland homeland, Honecker might have come to realize that the border, as it existed with the order to shoot, was inflicting serious harm on the GDR's reputation.

Source: "Eine Vereinigung hatte Honecker nicht im Sinn" [Interview: Hans-Jörg Heims], *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, May 7, 2010. © Süddeutsche Zeitung. Republished with permission.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

Recommended Citation: Ransom for Political Prisoners (Retrospective Account, 2009), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/two-germanies-1961-1989/ghdi:document-5045>> [April 20, 2024].