

Marion Gräfin Dönhoff on the Grand Coalition (1981)

Abstract

Marion Gräfin Dönhoff, often viewed as the *grande dame* of West German postwar journalism, highlights the achievements of the first Grand Coalition government between the CDU/CSU and the SPD (1966–69). At the same time, she also acknowledges the democratic shortcomings of that government and comments on the rise of the far-right National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD). The interlude of the Grand Coalition, Dönhoff argues, paved the way for a power shift at the federal level in 1969. Until that point, the FRG government had been in the hands of the CDU/CSU and its coalition partners.

Source

[...]

Before the SPD/FDP coalition under Willy Brandt assumed the reins of government in 1969 and wrote the new *Ostpolitik* into its program, there was another important interlude: the Grand Coalition. The government of the two major parties, the CDU/CSU and the SPD, was formed at the beginning of December 1966, after the fall of [Ludwig] Erhard, with Kurt Georg Kiesinger as chancellor and Willy Brandt as Minister for Foreign Affairs.

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The year 1968 was a year of profound unrest, dramatic tempestuousness, great hopes, and revolutionary dreams.

[...]

When, in the spring of 1968, students became restless in Poland, too, and demanded greater freedom, Moscow realized that it would be difficult to maintain the cohesion of the Eastern camp in the era of *détente*. That is why, amidst this tumult of enthusiasm, Soviet tanks rumbled into Prague on August 21. The armed intervention began, the entire Czechoslovak leadership was deposed, and all the hopes of the people were crushed.

Kiesinger's CDU regarded the new *Ostpolitik* as a failure, while its coalition partner, the SPD, believed that the Soviet Union had for the first time visibly lost the initiative toward the West, that is, the new policy was a success. The CDU/CSU mounted a defensive election campaign in 1969, falling back on old arguments; the SPD went on the offensive, waving the banner of *Ostpolitik*. The FDP had, for ages, always been the coalition partner of the CDU. The election of Gustav Heinemann as Federal President in March 1969 marked the first time that the FDP had voted with the SPD. And now, in the campaign of 1969, it moved ever closer to the SPD with respect to *Ostpolitik*. The result: the CDU/CSU lost the election, the SPD and the FDP together achieved a slim majority and banded together to form the new social-liberal coalition.

Since Chancellor Kiesinger had shown himself to be very receptive to *Ostpolitik*, the Grand Coalition became the crucial link between the four legislative periods during which the CDU had been in permanent government, and the takeover of government by the SPD, which was thereby redeemed from its opposition role, a role to which it had seemed condemned in perpetuity.

At least that was my impression, though it was hardly shared by other observers, since everyone saw this

period as a crime against the spirit of democracy. Of course, a Grand Coalition, where there is no effective opposition, that is, no adequate oversight, is not really desirable in terms of democratic playing rules. In this case, however, and that was my argument, it created the precondition for democracy in the first place, that is to say, for the alternation of parties: evidently, the SPD first had to be trotted out to the Germans in a two-horse team, meaning together with the proven lead horse, the CDU, before the public believed that it was possible to fare well with the Social Democrats, too.

Perhaps, to remind the reader of that brief time span between 1966 and 1969, I may take the liberty of quoting from an assessment that I made back in September 1969 in *Die Zeit*: “For the first time now, broader segments of the *Bürgertum* [middle class] are also discovering that the SPD is capable of governing. Of the three ministers who presented themselves to the public as the most interesting and effective cabinet members—Franz Josef Strauß, Willy Brandt, and Karl Schiller—two are from the SPD. Moreover, the basic stance toward several major issues has changed fundamentally: in economic and social policy, in foreign policy, and in the justice system.

To begin with the last one: the Grand Coalition has made more liberal reforms possible than the five previous cabinets together. A new law on state security has replaced old laws governed by the spirit of the Cold War, and clauses referring to moral law have been thoroughly trimmed.

While Erhard felt that every form of planning in the economy was heresy, Schiller favors *Globalsteuerung* [comprehensive management of the economy]. That is why medium-term financial planning and the stability law were introduced, deliberate *Konjunktursteuerung* [stabilization policy] was practiced, Concerted Action was invented,^[1] and a financial, social, and agricultural cabinet was set up. Under these aspects, it was finally also possible to address the structural crisis in mining with some energy. Lastly, the reform of the financial regime in May of this year offers the possibility that three shared tasks—the construction of universities, regional economic policy, and structural agricultural policy—can be jointly planned and financed by the federal government and the federal states [*Länder*] according to specific rules.

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In social policy, too, things have changed fundamentally in the era of the Grand Coalition. Whereas the basic approach used to be grounded in the conviction that welfare and charity were simply unavoidable, it is now commonly understood that social policy is necessary for socio-political reasons and can also be justified as an investment in the national economy.

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The Grand Coalition has thus not only produced structural changes, but has also altered the consciousness of citizens. And done so in a way, incidentally, that would never have been possible had the SPD government pursued these policies alone, for the SPD doesn't have a monopoly on wisdom either. Without the partnership, the SPD surely would have tried to realize much bolder plans—dreamed up during their years of ineffective opposition. But the Grand Coalition forced it to empirically assess the feasibility of such ideas. Now the path is open for normal politics, where the two large parties can alternate in government.”^[2]

Admittedly, there was one negative phenomenon in that brief period: the rise and fall of a radical right-wing party, the National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD). Various conservative and radical right-wing splinter groups had come together in 1964 to establish this party and, starting in 1966, it quickly achieved alarming success in the elections for various state [*Land*] parliaments: in 1966, it won 7.9% of all votes in Hesse, and 7.4% in Bavaria; in 1967, it won 7% of all votes in Lower Saxony, 8.9% in Bremen, and 9.8% in Baden-Württemberg.

What was characteristic of the party: it offset Auschwitz with Dresden^[3] and lamented “the spirit of submission.” It railed against bums, long hair, and *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* [coming to terms with the past]—it praised the healthy family, wished for a national rebirth, talked a lot about a community of fate, and had no political concept whatsoever. It was losers, backward-lookers, old diehards who came together—they were not Nazis or Fascists, but simply reactionaries. They were the last posse. In their own jargon: “After us there are no more trains.”

In the 1969 federal election, which ended the Grand Coalition, they were not able to clear the five-percent clause, and after 1970 they vanished from the state [*Land*] parliaments with the same inexplicable speed with which they had arisen. It may well be that this party was not only a product of the recession, but also an unpleasant accompaniment to the Grand Coalition; after all, as a consequence of joint governance by the two major parties, the coalition left an open space on the right side of the spectrum for those who found it impossible to sit on the same bench with the “Sozis”^[4] Additionally, the late sixties were a time of departure into modernity: nothing was modern enough—under those circumstances, these people simply could not and would not follow.

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NOTES

[1] Reference to the Law to Promote Economic Stability and Growth (1967), which included a provision allowing for government intervention in the event that price stability, full employment, balanced foreign trade, and economic growth were in danger—eds.

[2] Marion Dönhoff, *Deutsche Außenpolitik von Adenauer bis Brandt*. Hamburg: Wegner, 1970.

[3] Reference to the British/American aerial bombing attacks on the city of Dresden in February 1945—eds.

[4] i.e. Socialists—eds.

Source: Marion Gräfin Dönhoff, *Von Gestern nach Übermorgen. Zur Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*. Hamburg: Albrecht Knaus, 1981, pp. 189–97.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

Recommended Citation: Marion Gräfin Dönhoff on the Grand Coalition (1981), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/two-germanies-1961-1989/ghdi:document-5033>> [April 20, 2024].