

The End of Postwar History? (October 18, 1963)

Abstract

In his first policy statement, Ludwig Erhard reviews Konrad Adenauer's chancellorship and offers a sober analysis of the challenges facing Germany. According to Erhard, German policy must continue to focus on ending the Cold War and strengthening European and Atlantic cooperation. He cautions against complacency and urges Germans to continue exhibiting the drive that led to their economic success. He also warns against interest groups and calls for policies that benefit all.

Source

Policy Statement by the Federal Government

[...]

This government is a coalition government based on trusting partnership. It is buttressed by commonly agreed upon principles, which will also find expression in this declaration.

We have largely overcome the material consequences of the war and have been able to meet many urgent social tasks by building up a flourishing economy. The democratic order of our country is firmly in place, and the Federal Republic has found security in the Western alliance system. But our people remain divided. One segment is allowed to enjoy freedom; the other lives in a state of non-freedom [*Unfreiheit*] imposed from without. Despite encouraging initial steps, the project of European integration is by no means complete. The free world still lacks the firm ties that will enable it to successfully tackle its political, economic, and social tasks.

Even this brief survey shows that the tasks that lie ahead of us are of great importance. We have to look ahead. Not only the Federal Republic, but the entire world, is about to step out of the postwar era. The peoples of the world have been set in motion. We certainly cannot direct the flow of time, but we will safely steer our ship. In this age, German politicians are also called to action; they have to work just as effectively to advance the unity and strength of the Western alliance as they do to advocate peace and the resolution of our national questions.

Freedom is such a precious and universal value that a nation betrays itself by renouncing it. **Our polices must continue to be focused** on helping to bring about an end to the Cold War, which the Soviets have been waging for one and a half decades, above all by refusing Germans in the Soviet zone their right to self-determination. Therefore, German policies, domestic and foreign, will always have to be internationally oriented and will have to be designed in a more liberal manner than ever before in our history. They will contribute to strengthening European and Atlantic cooperation, and in the process, they will remain ever conscious of the fateful importance of close cooperation and solidarity with all our allies.

The more we harness our strengths and make them useful for the future of our people, the more effectively we will be able to confront the dangers facing the Federal Republic. From now on, more than ever before, our national solidarity will be put to the test and called upon to prove itself.

After the war, the creative energies of the German people mostly served the economic reconstruction of our country. Thanks to our liberal policies, members of all strata of our society have ample room for their own development. Economic competition tested our strengths and reinforced them. As a result, the

Federal Republic has become one of the greatest economic powers in the world today. This strength is based not only on its industrial power, on the achievements of agriculture, trade, the crafts, and the independent professions, on the efforts and abilities of business owners, blue- and white-collar workers, and all the members of the civil service, it is also based on the enrichment of our work through science and research.

The final product is a testament to all its makers.

But **what image of public life** presents itself to us today? We run the risk that the productive vigor of our society will increasingly give way to indulgence in what has already been achieved. Eighteen years after the end of the greatest catastrophe in German history, our society is characterized by the often exclusively materialistic preoccupations of a large segment of our population. For this reason, it is essential that all responsible forces in the country keep alive for the future that will to achieve that saved us.

As must still be made clear, we must stop directing our strength and resources toward special or individual interests. Instead, we must be mindful of the big picture and make our actions consistent with common goals.

I am certain that I am expressing both a concern and a desire of the German people when I urge the government and the parliament to look beyond the wishes of special interests and focus more decisively on the fundamental questions of politics.

Young people especially want to act in accordance with higher values and standards. They expect the state to uphold these ideals as well. Our young people want to be challenged! The more deliberately and truthfully we address them, the more successful we will be in keeping them from losing their way and wanting merely to earn money and be well off.

Let us also try not to be overly hasty in labeling every demand put on the state with the word "social" or "just," when in truth it all too often has to do with individual desires!

Let us not ignore the fact that well-developed advocacy on behalf of private and group interests is increasingly accompanied by a lack of civic spirit!

This is all the more serious, since the Federal Republic has granted its citizens an unusual measure of liberties in their private lives and assures them of its great respect for the value of individual development.

[...]

If, in political life, the state is therefore given the responsibility for defense and security, if it is to promote education, research, and health, if it is to keep the air and water clean, control traffic, continue building housing, and if greater social security benefits are demanded and the calls for subsidies and support continue at undiminished levels, then the citizens must understand that they are ultimately addressing themselves.

From this perspective, the accusation that the state shows too little understanding and achieves too little only reflects the lack of understanding of the citizens. There are no state benefits that are not based on popular sacrifice.

Therefore, we must address the interest groups in the widest sense. To be sure, they structure society and thus prevent individuals from becoming an easily manipulated mass. But, on the other hand, these organizations can also lead to the growing political disenfranchisement of the people. It's

understandable that groups grow out of the need for individuals to overcome feelings of individual powerlessness through solidaristic action and to thus become politically empowered. But it also cannot be denied that the apparatus created in the process is constantly tempted to control the people it represents.

[...]

The new federal government takes office at a phase in world politics when **changes in East-West relations** are becoming apparent. This August, years of discussion on questions of disarmament led, for the first time, to an agreement between the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union on a partial ban on nuclear weapons testing. The federal government signed this agreement after the necessary political clarifications were obtained and will submit the required ratifying law to the High House^[1] shortly. In doing so, however, the federal government, in agreement with its allies, does not indulge in the false hope that this agreement will decisively change the global political situation. The threat remains, and the repression of freedom continues, including on German soil.

The “German question” has not been resolved, and the free part of Berlin continues to suffer from being unnaturally cut off from the other part of the city and from German territories with which it had grown extremely close throughout the course of a long, shared history. Nevertheless, the federal government believes that contact and conversations between the United States and the Soviet Union can be useful and that they should be continued with the goal of examining whether there are ways to relieve some of the tension. [...]

NOTES

[1] Reference to the lower house of the parliament—eds.

Source: Erklärung der Bundesregierung, *Deutscher Bundestag — 4. Wahlperiode — 90. Sitzung*. Bonn, Friday, 18. October 1963, pp. 4192–94. Available online at:
<https://dserver.bundestag.de/btp/04/04090.pdf>

Translation: Allison Brown

Recommended Citation: The End of Postwar History? (October 18, 1963), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/two-germanies-1961-1989/ghdi:document-866>> [March 14, 2026].