

The Protestant Churches and Eastern Europe (October 15, 1965)

Abstract

In a controversial 1965 memorandum entitled “The Situation of the Expellees and the Relationship of the German People to their Eastern Neighbors,” the leaders of the Protestant Churches (which, at the time, were still organized in a single body in which both German states were represented), called for a critical examination of West Germany’s *Ostpolitik* and made indirect demands for recognition of the Oder-Neisse Line (and, hence, Poland’s postwar borders).

Source

The Situation of the Expellees and the Relationship of the German People to their Eastern Neighbors

[...]

VI. Germany’s Eastern Borders as a Political Responsibility

A review of international legal and theological-ethical issues has shown that the question of Germany’s Eastern borders cannot be solved by absolute arguments from law and ethics, or by means of a theology of creation and history. These issues can only offer us a kind of assistance in making decisions that the German people and their neighbors cannot avoid. We are dealing with political decisions that must be based on a reasonable assessment of the situation and made in careful cooperation leading to a lasting order of peace among nations. The legal, ethical, and theological considerations presented in this memorandum, reflections that must also find their way into political action, are meant to bring a new impetus to the political conceptions of the German people, and to offer our neighbors in the East a dialogue on a new level.

This dialogue is specifically concerned with the questions of the extent to which the expellees have a right to return to their old homeland and the extent to which there is a right to the return of the severed territories. It is unavoidable that both questions be posed within the relevant political and historical context of today. In the case of the German people and their Eastern neighbors, a sustainable future order of peace can only be achieved under the sign of a new beginning. The present state of almost complete alienation and mutual fear and hatred must be replaced by reconciliation, which is also possible between peoples of different nations. For the sake of world peace and a new European order, the peoples involved are obligated to exercise the utmost effort in discussing and settling the questions at stake in a manner that takes both points of view into account.

With respect to these questions, the political leadership of the Federal Republic of Germany has demonstrated a more wait-and-see attitude and has repeatedly defended its own legal position. There were, it must be conceded, important domestic political reasons for this caution. The subordination of one-fourth of the German state’s former territory under a foreign administration, and the expulsion of the resident population placed such high demands on the national discipline of the entire people that the danger of a nationalistic radicalization could not be dismissed out of hand. That such a radicalization has failed to materialize so far is a very remarkable feature of postwar German history. The German people can only make the sacrifice expected of them if they think historically, and, in doing so, bow to

the insight of a higher necessity. But this insight can only mature gradually. At the international level, there was also good reason for the hesitant treatment of Germany's Eastern territories on the part of those responsible for policy in the Federal Republic of Germany. The federal government can operate under the assumption of the German Reich's continued existence within the borders of 1937, as guaranteed by international law in the Western world. Premature definitive recognition of the provisions of the Potsdam Protocol of 1945 would be regarded as politically unwise, as it would mean abandoning valuable principles and objects for future peace negotiations.

At the same time, this wait-and-see attitude expresses the right principle: that the occupation of the Eastern territories, which took place in the context of war negotiations, and the transfer of their administration to another state cannot simply be turned into a unilateral annexation—insupportable both politically and in international law—and that the injustice of the expulsion cannot be passed over in silence. These controversial questions and all the territorial changes require a mutual determination by treaty. The value of these agreements is dependent upon a mutual belief in their necessity and mutual consent for the desired new beginning. At this point, it also becomes clear that the negative concept “renunciation” is a wholly inadequate way of designating the German contribution to any peace agreement meant to lay the foundation for a new partnership between nations. If a future settlement of territorial questions is meant to stabilize the relationship between the peoples involved, then it must be the result of a real dialogue and the expression of a will for reconciliation.

It is not the responsibility of a church memorandum to speculate about the right time to abandon this wait-and-see attitude toward our Eastern neighbors. But the formal argument that only a future all-German government is authorized to make such wide-reaching decisions can no longer justify postponing a clarification of the fundamental questions at stake here. The German people need to be prepared for the necessary steps, so that a government can then feel empowered to act when necessary. Such preparation has also become indispensable because the international situation has clearly changed since the 1950s. At that time, East and West confronted each other as two ideological power-blocs, which virtually precluded any independent action by a German government, whereas today there is movement on the frontlines. In this situation, the Western allies also expect a contribution from the Federal Republic of Germany toward détente, which is only possible if the government can count on the understanding and approval of the German people in taking a step in the spirit of reconciliation toward our Eastern neighbors.

Again, which individual steps will best promote the goal of reconciliation and reorganization cannot be discussed in this memorandum. The only certainty is that it will not suffice to keep emphasizing the German legal position rigidly and one-sidedly, but, at the same time, a German government cannot also be expected to abandon its legal position unconditionally at the outset. It is much more important to create an atmosphere at the outset, both among the German people and abroad, in which individual steps toward reconciliation with our Eastern neighbors become possible.

This certainly presupposes that the will to reconciliation also exists or can be awakened among these [other] nations as well. These peoples will also have to face the critical question of whether they want to persist in the self-righteousness they so often exhibit toward Germany. But the conversation can only begin when the German people indicate that they want to resist their own temptation to harden themselves in self-righteousness.

The present memorandum does not presume to map out pathways for those called upon to take the political action described. But it sees it as the responsibility of the church to give the German people a clearer awareness of the goals that really matter in the inner-German discussion, as opposed to what usually happens in this discussion, and to dispel the resistance that often arises against these goals. If politicians' room of maneuver is thereby enlarged, then it remains their responsibility to make proper use of this opportunity.

Source: R. Henkys, "Deutschland und die östlichen Nachbarn. Beiträge zu einer evangelischen Denkschrift." Stuttgart, 1966, pp. 214 ff; reprinted in Christoph Kleßmann, ed., *Zwei Staaten, eine Nation. Deutsche Geschichte 1955–1970*. Göttingen, 1988, pp. 508–10. Republished with permission.

Translation: Jeremiah Riemer

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