
Background to the News

West German Social Democrats backed East German communists to the end

by our European Bureau

The leadership of West Germany's Social Democratic Party (SPD), which has just formed an official branch within East Germany, has always stated that they want to help bring a "democratic socialism" into power within the German Democratic Republic (G.D.R.)—i.e., a "better" version of socialism. But the horse on which the party had sat up through the end of last year—namely, dictator Erich Honecker's Socialist Unity Party (SED)—has now become ill-suited, with the SED in the process of dissolution and East Germany's first free elections drawing near. The SPD is now out to form new partnerships—albeit very uneasy ones, since Germans "over there" have been making their revolution *against* socialism, and the last thing they want is merely another brand-name of the same thing.

In the material below, we present highlights of the SPD's six-year history of rapprochement, and finally close collaboration, with the communist SED regime.

The SPD's closing of ranks with the communists, which is part of the Socialist International's global strategy, in effect nullified the party's Feb. 26, 1971 resolution of incompatibility with the communists, and altered the party's ties to the West in favor of a "security partnership" with the communist states. SPD leader and former Chancellor Willy Brandt, the designer of *Ostpolitik* policy, has stated for his part, that it is "backwards-looking" to say that the German Question has not yet been settled.

Shoulder-to-shoulder with Honecker

November 1981: Up-and-coming SPD leader Oskar Lafontaine tells the newspaper *Rheinpfalz*: "If I were forced to choose, I would prefer to lead the life of a wine-grower in Kirghiz, or of a factory worker in Moscow, than to be burnt to cinders in a [U.S.-instigated—ed.] nuclear holocaust."

March 1984: A delegation of the SPD's parliamentary group led by Horst Ehmke visits the G.D.R. People's Chamber of Deputies. It is the first official contact with the SED since 1946. At the same time, Hans-Jochen Vogel, Egon Bahr, and SPD disarmament specialists Karsten Voigt and Herman Scheer travel from Moscow in order to meet with Honecker together with Egon Bahr. During the same month,

in the West German state of Schleswig-Holstein there is held "the first dialogue on disarmament between the SPD and the neighboring SED party districts." This later results in the formation of a parliamentary-level working group.

March 1984: SPD business manager Peter Glotz tells the party magazine *Neue Gesellschaft*: "The SPD is not ready for a re-ideologization of the East-West conflict, and will stick by the concept of . . . 'security partnership.' An acute threat to freedom, in the sense of a conflict of systems, does not exist. The Polish freedom movement has our sympathy; but it is a sympathy of resignation, of one who can only look on. We—the West—had neither the opportunity to influence the regimes in the East, nor could we have effectively supported the freedom movement. . . . Now, as before, our only course remains that of . . . perhaps having the areas of freedom become slowly enlarged by means of a second *Ostpolitik*."

May 17-20, 1984: The SPD's national congress in Essen marks the party's turning away from its ties with the West, and toward the concept of "security partnership" with the communist states.

September 1984: SPD presidium member Egon Bahr writes in the communist monthly journal *Problems of Peace and Socialism*, published in Prague: "Our priority remains peace, without which nothing else will function. And for this, especially in the nuclear age, the communists are our indispensable partners."

Sept. 20, 1984: The first meeting takes place between executive committee members of the SPD and SED.

Nov. 19, 1984: First meeting of the SPD's Basic Values Commission under Erhard Eppler with SED social science experts in Freudenstadt, West Germany.

May 1985: SPD politician Jürgen Schmude demands that West Germany recognize citizenship in the G.D.R. He states that the German Question is acting "as a threat" to Germany's friends in the West.

Sept. 19, 1985: For the first time since his resignation as Chancellor in 1974 because of the Günter Guillaume spy affair, Willy Brandt travels to the G.D.R. and meets with Erich Honecker. The joint communiqué states: "Both sides

had an exchange of views on questions of the Elbe border [between West and East Germany], national citizenship, and the Salzgitter Information Bureau." The SPD wants to shut down the latter organization, which collects data on crimes committed by the G.D.R.

Nov. 13, 1985: Oskar Lafontaine, now SPD state chairman and prime minister in Saarland, meets with SPD bigwigs Erich Honecker, Hermann Axen, and Günter Mittag in East Berlin, in order to "deepen the inner-German dialogue." Lafontaine issues a plea for recognition of G.D.R. citizenship.

March 1986: Erhard Eppler and the SPD Basic Values Commission confer in the Black Forest with SED social science experts.

March 1987: Gerhard Schröder, head of the SPD's state parliamentary group in Lower Saxony, meets in East Berlin with Hermann Axen. Schröder calls for recognition of G.D.R. citizenship.

May 15, 1987: Hans-Jochen Vogel, then head of the SPD parliamentary group, visits Honecker at Werbellinsee.

June 1987: The West German Communist Party (DKP) newspaper *Unsere Zeit* reports that many prominent Social Democrats—among them Oskar Lafontaine—sent greetings to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the founding of the Verein der Verfolgten des Naziregimes (VVN), a communist front-organization financed by the East German security organization, the Stasi.

The joint 'Ideology Paper'

August 1987: After three years of discussions, the SPD and SED publish a joint Ideology Paper authored by Erhard Eppler of the SPD and Otto Reinhold of the SED. One part reads: "Social Democrats and communists both hark back to Europe's humanist tradition. Both commit themselves to carrying this tradition forward, to representing the interests of the working people, and to bringing about democracy and human rights."

The SPD writes in the document that there should be competition over "which of the two systems can make the most effective contribution to solving humanity's most urgent problems, and which can offer the most favorable social conditions for humanity's development."

Eppler commented on Aug. 27, 1987: "Relaxation of political tension is not possible without an ideological loosening-up."

September 1987: Peter Pahmeier, SPD executive committee member in Ostwestfalen-Lippe, says that the new document means "that German Social Democrats and communists, despite their existing differences . . . finally want to jointly confront the most urgent problems. . . . Social Democrats and communists should begin an open process of learning and discussion. . . . During this dialogue, both sides should free themselves of mutual stigmatization. It's clear that all hindrances to an open dialogue must be cleared away. This goes for the occupational ban [against Communists

holding government jobs] as well as for anti-communism."

September 1987: Oskar Lafontaine receives SED chief Honecker, whose visit he evaluates as "one further sign of normalization of relations between both German states."

Oct. 25, 1987: Ignoring an official West German government boycott, Oskar Lafontaine and Hamburg mayor von Dohnanyi honor the G.D.R. regime under Honecker at the SED's celebration of the 750th anniversary celebrations for the city of Berlin.

Nov. 15, 1987: Erhard Eppler, commenting on an article appearing in the East German party newspaper *Neues Deutschland*, says the author is "not entirely wrong" when he writes that "People who preach every day about the threat from the East . . . are of course not very attractive, when it's been proven that socialism is able to develop and reform itself."

Nov. 29, 1987: Disregarding the Stasi attacks against members of East Berlin's Zionist community, the joint SED-SPD working group meets for a new round of discussions under the leadership of Hermann Axen and Egon Bahr.

Jan. 29, 1988: Dr. Thomas Meyer, member of the SPD Basic Values Commission and co-author of the Ideology Paper, holds a discussion with Prof. Reissig of the SED Central Committee's Academy for Social Sciences. Dr. Meyer says: "The Social Democracy does not regard itself as a party which defends the capitalist system. . . . We want to utilize [pluralism and multi-party democracy] in order to transform the capitalist system, because our final political aim is democratic socialism. Our criticism of the G.D.R. is not that it is socialist, but rather that it is not socialist according to our own measures."

May 1988: The SPD-SED joint working group holds its fourth meeting with Bahr and Axen.

June 1988: A joint SPD-SED communiqué on confidence-building in Europe says: "It is in keeping with their [SPD's and SED's] conviction . . . to demonstrate how additional stability and peace can be assured via the long path of creating a zone of confidence in Europe, which includes not only security, but also trust through comprehensive collaboration."

Sept. 30, 1988: The SPD in Bremen and the SED in Rostock agree upon "collaboration on the official level."

September 1988: Erhard Eppler says, "The SPD can not, as a matter of principle, exclude the DKP from the internal dialogue within our republic."

March 1989: The SPD wants to establish "ecological partnership" with the G.D.R. and floats the idea of debt-forgiveness, in return for "ecological measures" by East Germany. SPD politician Büchler says, "In contrast to the CDU [governing Christian Democrats], reunification is not the most prominent aim of our Germany policy."

Sept. 13, 1989: Hans-Jochen Vogel, questioned about the re-founding of the SPD within the G.D.R., says, "One would do well to leave such initiatives up to them over there."