

'We ought to have a funeral like this every year' from Der Spiegel (12 May 1980)

Caption: On 12 May 1980, German weekly Der Spiegel comments on the meeting between Erich Honecker, President of the GDR State Council, and Helmut Schmidt, Chancellor of the FRG, at Marshall Tito's funeral in Belgrade.

Source: Der Spiegel. Das Deutsche Nachrichten-Magazin. Hrsg. AUGSTEIN, Rudolf ; Herausgeber ENGEL, Johannes; BÖHME, Erich. 12.05.1980, n° 20; 34.Jg. Hamburg: Spiegel Verlag Rudolf Augstein GmbH. "So ein Begräbnis müßte jedes Jahr sein", p. 17-22.

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‘We ought to have a funeral like this every year’

The policy of détente must continue: that was the view shared by Erich Honecker and Helmut Schmidt at the German-German summit meeting in Belgrade. And, in order to re-start East-West dialogue, Chancellor Schmidt has been advised by Polish Communist Party chief Edward Gierek to visit Leonid Brezhnev in Moscow.

Helmut Schmidt began the summit in his stockinged feet. Weary after the flurry of discussions that had taken place on the margin of Marshal Tito’s funeral, the Chancellor, in the Belgrade residence of the Federal Republic’s Ambassador, had made himself at home in the living room adjoining the garden.

At six o’clock sharp last Thursday, the door opened, and in walked Erich Honecker. ‘Here already?’ called Schmidt. ‘I’m still in my socks!’ Unruffled, the SED leader replied: ‘No problem. That’s nice and cosy.’

As the Chancellor struggled to get his swollen feet back into his shoes, the Chairman of the GDR’s Council of State turned to Bonn Government spokesman Klaus Bölling — recently married to a daughter of spectacles manufacturer Rolf Rodenstock. ‘First of all, let me offer Mr Bölling my congratulations,’ he said. ‘Yes indeed, she’s a fine looking lady,’ agreed Schmidt, prompting Honecker to add: ‘With plenty of money too!’

The atmosphere at this second meeting between the East German Head of State and the West German Premier was relaxed and almost familiar. Gone was the tension that had characterised their first encounter, on the margin of the CSCE Conference in Helsinki five years before, when Honecker had seemed wooden and constrained, while Schmidt was condescendingly arrogant. The change is a reflection of rapprochement.

The two men now know one another better. They are in telephone contact more frequently than is generally realised on either side of the border, and Schmidt has thoroughly revised his earlier, dismissive assessment of the man he once referred to privately as a ‘jobsworth’.

Already at midday that Thursday, when he had met Honecker briefly at the funeral, Schmidt had gone out of his way to establish an easy interpersonal relationship between them. The Chancellor brought news of the SED leader’s old homeland, reporting that Wiebelskirchen in the Saarland, where Honecker spent his childhood, had now been incorporated into the district of Neunkirchen. Schmidt had gleaned this information while electioneering in the region. Responding with equal warmth, Honecker commented that Saarland had voted ‘the right way’ — high praise indeed from a Communist to a Social Democrat.

Thursday evening’s idyllic German-German encounter got under way with a photo call. Having greeted his guest, Schmidt immediately invited him onto the patio of the Ambassador’s residence, a Bauhaus-style Belgrade villa at 29 Tolstojeva Street. The pair even managed some small talk, praising the dignified manner in which the funeral had been conducted. Honecker chatted with *Der Spiegel* photographer Jupp Darchinger about the meeting in Helsinki and told him admiringly, ‘Yours were the best pictures,’ adding to Schmidt, ‘He’s a very good photographer.’

Back inside, the two seated themselves on an old-rose velvet sofa, facing a glass-topped coffee table on which stood a bouquet of lilacs. Honecker had ordered coffee, while Schmidt, as ever, sipped cola. They declined a snack, not wanting food to get in the way of their talk.

The members of the two delegations were then asked to leave the room, Honecker keeping with him only his right-hand man, Frank-Joachim Herrmann, while, on Schmidt’s side, notes were taken by Hans-Otto Bräutigam, German policy specialist in the Chancellor’s Office.

The GDR leader had explicitly requested that the talks team be kept small: he wanted to be able to speak freely without the presence of others (on his own side as much as Schmidt’s), so that he would not be obliged to weigh every word. It was for the same reason that he had suggested meeting in the Ambassador’s residence. And, so as to be doubly sure that there were no uninvited listeners, Ambassador Horst Grabert had brought in professionals to comb the premises for bugs.

Honecker spoke without referring to notes, and it seemed to the Chancellor that he had done his homework thoroughly. Schmidt, too, spoke with ease: back in his office, he had done a dry-run with advisers in preparation for the meeting.

The nub of the 78-minute discussion was an acknowledgement that Bonn and East Berlin share an interest in preventing further escalation of the international situation. The leaders agreed that the acute state of tension worldwide must not be allowed to worsen and that dialogue between the superpowers — the USA and the USSR — had to resume. They deemed it essential for Europe to remain a hub for peace and that the policy of détente must be maintained, with the two German states playing a key role.

Honecker then illustrated the common ground between the two Germanys by quoting, off the top of his head, from SPD leader Willy Brandt. Brandt had been quite right, he said, in urging that no effort be spared to sustain the requisite level of normalisation in Europe. And Honecker told Schmidt: ‘This has to be our shared aim.’

The two also agreed that the only way to rescue détente in Europe was for Washington and Moscow to resume negotiations on arms control.

Schmidt waited in vain, however, for Honecker to be more specific on the subject of disarmament. He had hoped that his East German counterpart might convey a clear indication from Moscow that would guarantee the success of Schmidt’s planned visit to the Soviet Union in early July.

Honecker and Gierek say the Moscow visit should go ahead

The trip to Moscow would be an unqualified success if the Russians would formally declare a commitment to easing international tension, to defusing the crisis in Afghanistan and to engaging in fresh negotiations with the West about the elimination of medium-range nuclear weapons. But Schmidt has already indicated to close associates that he himself is sceptical about the prospects of so much movement on the Soviet side.

Nonetheless, Honecker did not come to the table empty-handed: he explicitly encouraged the Chancellor to go to Moscow, affirming that the visit would have positive effects, and not only on German-Soviet relations.

Schmidt listened attentively, for, at breakfast in the Inter-Continental Hotel that very morning, Polish party leader Edward Gierek had said virtually the same thing. Although Gierek, too, was still awaiting the desired clear signal from Moscow, he had insisted that Schmidt go ahead with the trip.

Like Honecker, Gierek had made the point that Schmidt’s visit would be highly significant, specifically for the Soviet Union’s partner countries. The West German leader could help to ensure that countries like Poland and the GDR were able to retain their room for manoeuvre vis-à-vis the superpower. His visit would help to reduce the anxiety in Warsaw and East Berlin that any further increase in international tension could make the Eastern European countries more closely dependent on the Soviet Union, to the detriment of their relations with the West.

Talking later with his advisers, Schmidt tried to deduce what lay behind the recommendation from his two discussion partners. All that was clear was that the Soviet side had, to date, failed to respond to Schmidt’s proposal that — as a gesture of goodwill until the opening of disarmament negotiations — Moscow call a moratorium on delivery to the army of the SS-20 medium-range rockets currently being rushed off the production line.

So it was with some hesitation and a measure of caution that the Bonn Delegation in Belgrade decided to put an optimistic interpretation on Gierek’s and Honecker’s words: after all, the pair would scarcely have recommended the visit so emphatically had the Soviet Government not actually wanted to offer the German Chancellor anything in Moscow.

Already, during his meeting with Honecker, Schmidt had determined to face the future with confidence. He bade his guest a demonstratively warm goodbye. As Honecker, heading for his black Mercedes, commented: ‘The discussion was very useful and served the interests of peace,’ Schmidt nodded and voiced agreement. Schmidt waved to Honecker as the East German leader sat in the back of the car and again as it moved off. Honecker sought eye contact with Schmidt and waved back.

The Chancellor told the press that the discussion had been ‘friendly [...] as was only to be expected’. He said that it had been agreed to ‘further extend and reinforce’ the ‘network of cooperation’ between the Federal Republic and the GDR.

Schmidt had even agreed with Honecker what he would tell the press. As the talks in the Ambassador’s residence concluded, the press spokesmen for the two sides, Wolfgang Meyer and Klaus Bölling, were called into the room. Honecker and Meyer wanted to issue only a brief statement and asked the West Germans if they agreed. ‘Surely we need to put some more flesh on the bones, Sir,’ was Bölling’s reply. Schmidt proposed that the press be told not only of the two leaders’ shared anxiety about world peace but also that German-German relations were working well.

Last Friday, on his return from Belgrade, Schmidt again emphasised the degree of common ground between West and East. ‘It made a deep impression on me to hear Gierek and Honecker saying the same thing that I was saying, namely that we do not want to get dragged into trouble if we can avoid it.’

Failed efforts to tempt Jimmy Carter to Belgrade

It is an indication of the changed world we live in that, on 8 May 1980, the 35th anniversary of the fall of Germany, Schmidt and Honecker, invoking the good relations between the two German states, should find themselves at a German-German summit in Yugoslavia, a country with which Bonn had broken off diplomatic relations in 1957 after Belgrade granted diplomatic recognition to the GDR.

And there is a further paradox. Whereas, for years, Kremlin watchers had been predicting that, once Tito was dead, the Russians could march into Yugoslavia, thereby dramatically increasing the threat to world peace, the meetings at Tito’s graveside actually indicated a way back to détente.

Since last autumn, tension has been mounting steadily. One development after another has brought the threat of war nearer: the stationing of Soviet combat troops in Cuba, the Tehran hostage crisis, NATO’s ‘double-track’ decision on nuclear armament, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the failed commando mission to free the US hostages.

The Bonn Delegation hopes, however, that the East-West encounters in Belgrade could be the turning point towards a policy of de-escalation. As Bölling put it, ‘The meeting has the potential to break the ice.’

Helmut Schmidt — for many years reputed to be lukewarm about the Ostpolitik and German-German relations — demonstrated in Belgrade that he is ready to be proactive in rescuing the policy of détente.

The Germans showed in Belgrade that they were not content merely to bemoan failures on the part of the superpowers. The very weight of their presence at the funeral — not only the Chancellor and Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher but also Federal President Karl Carstens and SPD leader Willy Brandt had travelled to be there — indicated their level of commitment, in contrast, for example, to that of French President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, who did not even travel to Belgrade.

Right up to the moment of his departure, Chancellor Schmidt had done his best to urge the US President also to make the journey. Bonn had argued at a high level that Jimmy Carter would be able to meet Brezhnev in Belgrade and resume the dialogue between East and West. Permanent Secretary Bölling commented: ‘We think that this would have been useful.’ Last Wednesday, in a campaign speech in Wuppertal, just an hour before flying out to Yugoslavia, Schmidt was calling on the superpowers to resolve their quarrel.

But the negative response from the White House was unequivocal. According to Washington, it was the wrong time for a summit. Vice President Walter Mondale came to the funeral as Carter's representative, accompanied — to add insult to injury — by the latter's mother, Lillian.

So Brezhnev topped the bill, and even the British Premier, 'Maggie' Thatcher, despite her orthodox pro-Americanism, had little sympathy for Carter's decision to stay away.

One of the main benefits that Bonn would have expected to derive from a Carter-Brezhnev meeting would have been a boost to German-Soviet relations. The Chancellor's advisers all agreed that Schmidt ought not to meet Brezhnev in Belgrade until the Russian leader had spoken with Mondale. To do otherwise, they felt, would have been to place further strain on the relationship between Bonn and Washington, which had already been highly sensitive for some months.

Following the protracted to-ing and fro-ing over the Olympic Games boycott and the sanctions against Iran, the Chancellor, too, felt it would be unwise to provoke the Americans further by engaging in any cosy German-Soviet meeting of minds.

So the Chancellor confined himself, at the funeral, to a brief exchange of courtesies with the Communist leader, with Gromyko interpreting. SPD leader Brandt, free of governmental constraints, spent more time with Brezhnev. Under the unblinking eye of Yugoslav television cameras, the two men greeted one another warmly and at length — like old friends.

Not even muted hints from the Soviet side that Brezhnev was keen to talk with Schmidt in Belgrade could change the Chancellor's mind. For Hans-Georg Wieck, West Germany's Ambassador to the Soviet Union, had advised the previous Thursday that the only matter that Brezhnev wanted to discuss was whether the Federal Republic might not, after all, send a team to the Olympic Games in Moscow.

Schmidt felt that any discussion about the Games would have been inopportune — rekindling doubts in Washington about West German solidarity.

In the other contacts that he made, the West German leader also divided his time scrupulously so that (in the words of one of his advisers) 'there would be no hint of one-sidedness'. Indeed, when he met Mondale, he felt it appropriate to offer assurances that the Federal Republic was firmly in the Western camp. 'We are not sitting on the fence,' he said. 'We are part of the West.'

It was not only in direct East-West exchanges — with Mondale, Gierek and Honecker — that the West German Delegation talked up the case for peace and détente. In talks with Indian Premier Indira Gandhi and Algerian President Benjedid Chadli, Schmidt urged that the Non-Aligned Nations should lend their weight to the search for solutions in Afghanistan and the Middle East as a matter of urgency.

The Socialist International, too, under Brandt's presidency, is keen to play an active role and, according to Austrian Premier Bruno Kreisky, wants to engage in direct talks with the leaders of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, with a view to ending the hostage crisis and reinforcing the political influence of the moderates there.

Kreisky and Brandt are counting on appropriate support from PLO leader Yasser Arafat, with whom Kreisky held lengthy discussions in Belgrade.

This Friday, at ceremonies in Vienna to mark the 25th anniversary of the Austrian State Treaty, Kreisky intends to give new US Secretary of State Edmund Muskie a comprehensive briefing. Brandt, meanwhile, is cautiously optimistic: 'Everyone realises that, over the next few weeks, we shall be doing more than sizing one another up.'

'We must keep the channels open.'

Bonn's firm commitment to détente reflects its conviction that the East-West conflict is capable of resolution

by peaceful means. Eastern Bloc experts take the view that the USSR would ultimately recoil from military conflict.

Schmidt's mantra, repeated again in these summit-level discussions, has been: 'We must keep the channels open.' And he is all the more zealous on this score inasmuch as he is aware of the weaknesses on the Western side.

Military experts in Bonn take the view than any future conflict will be hard to contain. They fear that any initially local dispute in which the superpowers became involved would inevitably escalate into nuclear mayhem.

The reasoning here is simple: in the potential hotspots of the Middle East and Europe, the USA could not win a war with conventional weapons.

That is why, right from the outset, Schmidt has dismissed Carter's new doctrine — that American interests in the Gulf will be defended by force if necessary — as empty posturing.

Equally hollow, in the Chancellor's view, is the defence guarantee for Yugoslavia which the US President, unbidden, renewed directly after Tito's death (albeit with a raft of hedging clauses): the latest in a line of rash and over-eager Carter initiatives.

Carter knows as well as anyone else that the Soviet side has some 45 divisions on stand-by in south-east Europe, as well as 2 000 combat aircraft. All the USA has to pitch against these are 2 000 marines from its Mediterranean fleet and around 1 000 airborne troops, the rest of its forces being tied up with NATO.

The White House is also bound to realise that a Soviet invasion of Yugoslavia would not necessarily bring NATO onto the scene. Tito's successors, sizing up the situation realistically, have already made Carter aware that they expect no help from him.

Notwithstanding all these considerations, the Chancellor fully recognises the risks of his delicate manoeuvring between East and West, not only in relation to the USA, but also in terms of his own domestic policy. Directing words and gestures of friendship towards Communist leaders, while issuing critical warnings to (and maintaining a distance from) the protecting power in Washington is a policy that irritates substantial sections of the public.

Schmidt does not want to give the impression of naively allowing himself to be pulled along in pursuit of Soviet aims or of suddenly having metamorphosed from sober political realist into starry-eyed détente dreamer.

His party colleagues urge caution. His CDU/CSU opponents are simply awaiting an opportunity to brand the Chancellor as a member of the 'Moscow faction' — the group of SPD politicians whom they regard as Soviet fifth columnists.

Before the trip to Belgrade, Defence Minister Hans Apel warned Schmidt that all his efforts, and particularly the visit to Moscow, would have to 'yield results'. It would be embarrassing, indeed, if the Chancellor had to admit on his return that he had heard only the same well-worn views.

To spare himself a chorus of 'I told you so' from the Americans in the event of a fruitless visit, Schmidt has postponed the Moscow trip once already. He had originally intended to head for the Soviet Union before the planned G7 Economic Summit in Venice in late June, but he no longer feels this would be the best timing. Instead he wants to meet the US President in Italy to agree the details of his agenda for the Kremlin trip.

It was FDP Foreign Minister Genscher who insisted that Schmidt talk with Carter first. Genscher would have preferred to postpone the Moscow visit until the autumn, as he feels the time is not yet ripe for it.

Sceptical as ever, he fears that Franz Josef Strauß's party could make the to-ing and fro-ing with Communist countries a pretext for tarring Schmidt with the same brush as Willy Brandt, Herbert Wehner and Egon Bahr, as a friend of Moscow.

New bases for resolving the Afghanistan crisis

Before the Belgrade trip, therefore, Genscher publicly warned that the 'key task' was to drum home to the Soviet side the doomed nature of 'their attempts to put a wedge between Europe and the USA'. At the same time, he has tried to curb all expectations of a fruitful outcome in Moscow, saying that he currently sees 'no prospect for an attempt by the Federal Republic to achieve tangible results'.

Despite all Genscher's reservations, however, the Chancellor has not been deflected from seeking talks with Brezhnev as soon as possible. Schmidt believes that the Federal Republic has offered sufficient proof of its loyalty to America by deciding to support both the Olympic boycott and the economic sanctions against Iran.

Another reason for maintaining his Moscow plans is his conviction that the hardening of positions since the invasion of Afghanistan is gradually becoming uncomfortable for the Kremlin. Bölling commented: 'The Chancellor's visit could supply the basic building blocks for a new round of talks.'

Bonn is convinced that, until the US presidential elections are over, there will be 'no movement' (as a Foreign Office diplomat put it) in Afghanistan. At the same time, however, the Chancellor remains sure that the USSR will want to pull its troops out once it has stabilised the shaky regime in Kabul, although he acknowledges that this could take months if not years.

Schmidt therefore believes there is a pressing need to take soundings in Moscow as to when, and under what conditions, a troop withdrawal would be considered feasible. The ideal solution — so Schmidt told India's Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and Pakistan's Head of State Zia ul-Haq in Belgrade — would be for the Non-Aligned Nations to help promote such a course of action.

The view that this type of initiative would stand more chance of success than renewed appeals from the West was also reinforced in Schmidt's discussions last Tuesday with Bruno Kreisky, when the Austrian Chancellor told him: 'I am unimpressed by an initiative that involves the opposition.'

In the suites of Belgrade's Inter-Continental Hotel, the guests from 121 countries assembled for the state funeral were already discussing possible bases for an initiative on Afghanistan. These include:

- resolving the problems of borders and refugees with the neighbouring Islamic states of Iran and Pakistan, from which opposition forces filter into Afghanistan to attack the regime in Kabul, thus hindering consolidation of the Karmal government;
- arranging for the return of refugees, unarmed and with a guarantee of legal safety;
- exploring how the Karmal government might strengthen its support base by involving pro-Islamic factions;
- confirmation (from within the country itself, rather than from outside) of Afghanistan's non-aligned status as a friendly neighbour of the Soviet Union.

Cuba's Fidel Castro, current President of the Non-Aligned Nations Association, sent a personal message to Kreisky two weeks ago assuring him of support for an initiative along these lines. And Indira Gandhi let it be known in Belgrade that she believes Moscow would be open to an initiative by the non-aligned movement.

Whether the Russians are really ready to give ground in Afghanistan is something that the West can explore this week in Vienna when Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko meets his US counterpart Edmund Muskie.

After the encouraging noises in Belgrade, Schmidt is hopeful that the Vienna meeting of Foreign Ministers

will yield practical indications about what, on the one hand, the US Administration expects from him and what he, on the other hand, can achieve in Moscow. The tenor of Genscher's report will determine whether or not Foreign Office official Günther van Well flies to Moscow next week to make arrangements for the Chancellor's visit and confirm dates.

Bonn would regard it as progress if the Soviet side were finally to give a clear indication of whether and how disarmament negotiations might be restarted — whether Moscow would insist on NATO first formally rescinding its decision on medium-range weapons or whether deferment would be enough. One Foreign Office source said: 'Every time we ask this question in Moscow we get a different answer.'

Only the forthcoming meetings — the Warsaw Pact states' summit this week, the anniversary ceremonies in Vienna, the G7 summit in Venice and, indeed, the Chancellor's visit to Moscow — will finally indicate whether the Belgrade talks were merely a failed attempt at reviving détente, or whether the working funeral really did mark a turning point.

Jordan's King Hussein was in thoughtful mood as he took his leave of Willy Brandt in Belgrade last Thursday, commenting: 'This funeral is the end of the post-war era. It could also be the start of a new era: if so, let us hope it will not be too bad.'

The Chancellor, striking a somewhat more pragmatic note, replied: 'We ought to have a funeral like this every year.'