

'Encounter with broad implications' from the Süddeutsche Zeitung

Caption: On 19 and 20 May 1973, German daily newspaper Süddeutsche Zeitung comments on the first official visit by Leonid Brejnev, First Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party, to the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG).

Source: Süddeutsche Zeitung. Münchner Neueste Nachrichten aus Politik, Kultur, Wirtschaft und Spor. Hrsg. Dürrmeier, Hans ; Herausgeber Heigert, H. 19/20.05.1973, Nr. 115. München: Süddeutscher Verlag GmbH. "Begegnung mit Tragweite", auteur:Riedmiller, Josef , p. 4.

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Encounter with broad implications

by Josef Riemiller, currently in Bonn

The visit to Bonn by the Soviet party leader Leonid Brezhnev has been called an ‘historic event’ so often and without any further justification that I am rather reluctant to repeat this label that is, of itself, neither positive nor negative in content. Nevertheless, it is justified. First of all from the point of view of German-Russian history alone, which has not seen an event of this kind since the times of the Tsars and the Kaisers. Admittedly, the balance of power between Germany and Russia has shifted a great deal to the disadvantage of the Germans since then, something for which the Germans are to blame, but bad and good experiences, perhaps also a mysterious symmetry in history, will not allow the two nations to escape from the spell that binds their interests together, sometimes in admiration and sometimes in fear.

However, it is bound to seem to many people that this visit, taking place 28 years after the end of the war, has not come too early; for this reason, they are easily inclined to see in it no more than an event just like any other of comparable outward magnitude. Anyone who thinks like this has not only forgotten the consequences of the war — the division of Germany and establishment of Soviet power in Central Europe — they are also overlooking the fact that the two decades of attempts by the Federal Republic to change some of the most painful consequences of the war with the aid of the Western Allies were a failure. From this point of view, the Brezhnev visit marks Bonn’s definitive recognition of the present status quo; without this recognition, it would not have come about. For this reason alone, the visit would have to be termed an historic event: the victor comes to the loser, who has seen the error of his ways, but not in the pose of the victor.

No adventures

The visit may therefore symbolise the end of the war, including the Cold War between the two countries, albeit without any peace treaty. However, the visit only acquires its real significance from what it achieves in opening up opportunities for the future. And this is where the doubts begin to creep in, not so much here with us as among our neighbours. The balance of power problems have certainly been quite fundamentally eased; however, for many people in both Western and Eastern Europe, a German-Russian tête-à-tête continues to be one of the most feared of all nightmares. All too often, German-Russian agreements have caused radical changes in the situation in Europe — too often for these fears to be dismissed simply as outdated reflexes from past history. Adenauer, who knew his countrymen well, tried to prevent any ‘Eastern temptation’ by endeavouring to bind the Federal Republic firmly to the West. But, apart from the fact that integration did not succeed to the extent that had been planned, the undertaking had the disadvantage that it proceeded on the basis of the assumption that the creation of the new Federal Republic as a country unrestrained by history, as it were, would mean that the problem between West and East would never arise again. The long-used practice of excluding the East from our historical framework, except for superficial election purposes, made the resumption of its inclusion highly traumatic for many people, especially for our neighbours. It was, and is more than ever, a delicate task in German policy-making to produce evidence that Germany is not a hinge on the door that provides the opening for Europe to conduct experiments. But is it precisely for this reason that we must also make policies with the East without permitting any misuse or even any mere misunderstandings.

Federal Chancellor Brandt and Brezhnev, however, are anything but political adventurers. A reversal of alliances by the Federal Republic will not be demanded by the latter nor admitted by the former. But that is not the question anyway. In the matter of international subjects for discussion, such as the European Security Conference or troop reductions, both parties to the negotiations, in defiance of every protestation to the contrary, are so bound to their respective bloc policies that there is really no more to be expected than declarations of intent in support of these projects — which, at all events, should Brandt go too far, could be overturned by the Western powers at any time. As highly significant as these subjects may be, the main thrust of the discussions will probably lie in how to shape the future bilateral relationship, in as far as this issue is not removed from the scope of Bonn’s responsibilities, and transferred, for example, to the European Community. Nor should the future of this relationship be judged predominantly by the agreements that will

be signed in the next few days; quite the reverse, its long-term programming must be kept in constant review, and the guiding spirit will be a result of what is termed the atmospheric.

Berlin remains the bone of contention

In the wide area under discussion here, shifts in accent or even realignment of Bonn's foreign and economic policy cannot be ruled out. This applies particularly to economic and industrial cooperation. In reference to this, the expression 'Soviet embrace' is already doing the rounds in Bonn. The Soviet insistence has various motives. Apart from the need for the Soviet Union to catch up in a number of areas from its antiquated technology base, it certainly also results from an overestimation of the economic opportunities provided by the Federal Republic and from the belief in miracles that still surrounds German technology in the eyes of the Russians. The idea that the huge potential in the Soviet Union plus German technology and organisation would represent an unbeatable combination has a not inconsiderable circle of supporters in the Soviet Union; if for no other reason, then because it is seen as a way of dampening down any subliminal fears of the unpredictability of the Germans.

However, Moscow would seem to have something else in mind along with its bilateral treaties of cooperation which, after all, do not only involve the Federal Republic — and that is to undermine the European Community as a united economic area. These efforts cover not only the preparations for a European Security Conference in Helsinki but also the bilateral agreements with the Member States of the EC. By using these treaties of economic cooperation, in which it is also possible to play off one Western partner against another, Moscow seems to be making an attempt not only to circumvent any recognition of the EC but also to gain influence over the countries concerned. It is beyond question that economic cooperation with the Soviet Union is not only desirable but, with regard to future raw material and energy supplies, also necessary. However, in that connection, Bonn will also have to have regard for the overheated domestic economic situation in Germany, which would be further exacerbated by large-scale industrial projects that might also require reduced-cost loans from the state.

The problem of West Berlin that still continues to exist between Bonn and Moscow in spite of the Four Power Agreements has been pronounced by Brezhnev to be 'solved'. None the less, Brandt will have to return to the issue, even if only out of a sense of obligation. For neither the Four Power Agreement itself nor any West Berlin clause in German-Soviet treaties provides blanket cover for all the cases that affect the status and security of West Berlin, for which all four powers have ensured that they have retained reservations. Here, apart from the relaxation of measures relating to visits and travel, the future does not look much rosier than it did before the treaties were concluded: West Berlin will continue to be a bone of contention, and, indeed, in almost every individual case. However, it also remains a test case for the seriousness of the Soviet declarations that they are beginning a new chapter in German-Soviet relations.