

Interview with Egon Bahr (Metz, 10 June 2006) – Excerpt: Germany in the post-war period and the question of rearmament

Caption: In this interview, Egon Bahr, a journalist working in Berlin and Bonn from 1945 to 1960, talks about the Berlin Blockade that followed the Second World War as well as the establishment of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) in 1949. He makes special mention of the difficulties of anchoring, politically and militarily, the FRG in the Western bloc without hazarding any prospects of reunification with the German Democratic Republic (GDR).

Source: Interview d'Egon Bahr / EGON BAHR, François Klein, prise de vue : François Fabert.- Metz: CVCE [Prod.], 10.06.2006. CVCE, Sanem. - VIDEO (00:15:54, Couleur, Son original).

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Interview with Egon Bahr: Germany in the post-war period and the question of rearmament (Metz, 10 June 2006)

[François Klein] From 1948 to 1960, you were a journalist in Bonn and Berlin. How did you experience the involvement of the young Federal Republic of Germany in the beginnings of the European integration process?

[Egon Bahr] I have to start a bit before 1948, because at that time in Berlin we were living through a particularly menacing situation; the question of Europe simply did not enter our field of vision. We were living in a city divided into four parts. In particular, we were being subjected to a blockade, an attempt to starve the three western sectors to death. In other words, we lived to defend ourselves against a threat from the east. We were proud of the fact that West Berliners who were offered the opportunity of going into the eastern sector to shop for what they could not get in West Berlin ... because we were short of things in the west. With the Berlin Airlift we got dried potato and powdered milk in the western sectors and we got a little bit of coal, which meant that basically we had no means of heating and not much to eat. And we were quite proud of the fact that only a very small proportion of West Berliners — I don't know how many, 1 % or less — took advantage of the opportunity to buy fresh vegetables and bread in the eastern sector; hence there was a strong feeling of defiance towards the east.

Then in November 1948 — when we already had about five months of blockade behind us — I was flown out to Hamburg on a British aircraft which had brought coal. It was not very comfortable, it was my first flight, and it was, I suppose, my first culture shock. For I had come from a dark West Berlin, in which we had little electricity and then only for a few hours at a time, to a brightly lit city, a city in which everything was to be had. The way Hamburg looked in 1948, that is how we imagined Switzerland: bright lights and the shops full. I vowed, when I went into a restaurant for the first time and ordered something, in future never again to send anything back on my plate, but always to eat everything up. I have not always been able to live up to that vow ...

Anyway, we had stayed behind in Berlin, and we had not lived through the shock of currency reform. We suffered deprivation, there was to some extent greater deprivation in West Berlin than immediately before; that is, before the start of the blockade. Our minds were focused on one issue: the Basic Law was being drafted, preparations were under way for the formation of the Federal Government and the Federal Republic of Germany. And the question that preoccupied us, which I also reflected on, was: what will become of Berlin? The three powers had decided that Berlin must not become part of the Federal Republic. Berlin was in principle a four-power concern, under the direct sovereignty of the four powers, and this four-power status was to remain in place. Those who were forming a government in Bonn were entirely in agreement with that, for this nascent Federal Republic was much too weak to guarantee West Berlin. Besides, we fully understood that the freedom of the three western sectors was solely due to the airlift, in other words to the commitment of the Americans. It was clear that it was a global political issue because — let me fast-forward a little — later, in 1970, I had contact with a Soviet citizen and a back channel between Bonn and Moscow, and I said to him in conversation that, back then, during the airlift, the Soviet Union had lost the souls of the Germans. And he smiled a little and said 'Yes, that is no doubt true, but America lost China'. Indeed, even America was not strong enough to guarantee air-transport capacity to feed a city with a population of several million, Berlin, and at the same time to secure the transport effort needed to give effective support to Chiang Kai-shek in China.

So in 1949 we had a situation in which people said, well, let's see how things go. We did not even consider the question of unity. It did not occur to us that it would be possible to divide a country over the long term or to keep it divided. We were still guided by the Potsdam Agreement and felt assured that Germany would be treated as a single entity, that central authorities would be created. And it was in Berlin, I would say, that the Cold War began, that the rivalry between East and West and the wrangling over Germany got started. When the negotiations on the Schuman Plan — the pooling of coal and steel in Europe — began in Paris in 1950, I was in Paris for the first time since the war. I had been in Paris for a day during the war as a soldier, full of admiration. Let me digress for a moment — we were to move from Brussels to Dieppe and had our marching orders; we decided that the best route was through Paris and, of course, we missed the only train

which ran from Paris to Dieppe and were stuck in Paris for a day. We had a look round the city, what was to be seen — of course the *Dôme des Invalides*. We stepped up to the balustrade of the gallery and looked down onto the sarcophagus of the great Corsican, and we had a guide who said to us ‘the idea is that everyone who comes here to pay his respects to Napoleon steps forward to this balustrade and, whether he wants to or not, bows before the genius of the Emperor. Your *Führer* has also been here’.

So in Paris in 1950, there was only unanimous approbation. After all, there could be no ill will; on the contrary there was a feeling of relief and there was the fact that the Federal Republic also sat at the table. There was for the first time an intimation of the acceptance of equal rights for these defeated Germans. Hence, an unreservedly positive occasion, marked by pride and hope. That was the beginning; your question of course spans the period up to 1960. It was a phase in which an issue arose — back in 1954 — that, we have to realise of course, could not have been anticipated in 1945 or even in 1948; namely, rearmament. Obviously, in 1949, when the main topic of discussion was the Basic Law, we had absolutely no thought of rearmament. Armed forces, soldiers, were not envisaged for this Federal Republic. No one worried about them. No one missed them. Germans were in a situation in which, quite naturally, they had lost all appetite for power, influence and military might. They were utterly defeated. They wanted no more to do with all that nonsense. And now, suddenly, they had to address the issue! Inevitably, we had a passionate debate on rearmament.

Adenauer had difficulty winning us over. He first lost his interior minister: Gustav Heinemann, who later became President of the Federal Republic, resigned from the government. And the question was twofold. Firstly, could the emergent Federal Republic establish a bond with the West without this threatening to make unity more difficult? Would unity not also become more difficult since, of course, if the West Germans were militarily committed to an organisation, then the East would also take on a military commitment? As long as it was only a case of economic links, in other words the Warsaw Pact on one side and the European Community or EEC on the other, that was not so bad. That way we could take care that the links between the two parts of Germany would be reconnected economically when it became possible to do so. But once the Germans were militarily committed, and that continued for a certain length of time, the military and security policy interests on both sides would be so strong that these Germans would no longer be able to dissociate themselves from them. Hence a discussion got under way on the question ‘can it be that Europe will make German unity impossible?’ This question was not only passionately debated in the opposition at the time but also in the government parties, i.e. the CDU, CSU and FDP. And great importance was attached in the negotiations to finding a form of words in which Germany would retain a measure of decision-making discretion in the event of reunification, i.e. would be able to leave NATO and the EC.