

Interview with Egon Bahr: the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the beginnings of the European integration process (Metz, 10 June 2006)

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[François Klein] In 1956 you became a member of the SPD ...

[Egon Bahr] Fifty-six ...

[François Klein] Yes, 1956. How did the leaders of that party, Kurt Schumacher until 1952 and then Erich Ollenhauer, feel about the European integration process?

[Egon Bahr] I have already alluded to that. There were somewhat differing positions within the SPD. The West German SPD was more sceptical. The West German SPD, and indeed parts of the CDU too, had not forgotten that Adenauer had displayed separatist tendencies after the First World War — a Confederation of the Rhine, a Rhenish state. And it looked as though the predominantly Catholic western area of Germany would be united with the predominantly Catholic remainder of Europe; that was a lingering suspicion. The devoutly Catholic chairman of the CDU in the Soviet-occupied zone, Jakob Kaiser, had said to me back in 1946 that we must prevent that separatist Adenauer from gaining control of the CDU.

The situation in Berlin was different. Schumacher and Ollenhauer, naturally enough, thought like West Germans. Reuter, the first Governing Mayor, and Brandt were Berlin-driven, that is to say it was impossible for them to focus purely on the West — they always had to turn their thoughts eastward too. As a result, of course, the Berlin SPD was far more strongly and favourably disposed to European integration and, by the same token, to NATO. They knew what they owed the Americans. That division was healed, if you like, in 1961 when Brandt first became the party's candidate for the chancellorship. There was no doubt that he united the party, that he rallied it behind a clear pro-integration position.