

Interview with Egon Bahr: the origins of the new Ostpolitik (Metz, 10 June 2006)

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Last updated: 05/07/2016



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[François Klein] In 1960, Willy Brandt, who was then Governing Mayor of Berlin, appointed you head of the Press and Information Office of the federal state of Berlin, a position you were to occupy until 1966. Together with Willy Brandt, you developed the precepts of foreign policy that would lay the foundations for the subsequent new 'Ostpolitik' of the Federal Republic. What was your working method, and what were the main elements of this new approach during that period?

[Egon Bahr] First of all, there can be no doubt that we always felt ourselves to be under a potential threat in West Berlin. Moreover, it goes without saying that we had not forgotten the experience of 1953, the uprising of 17 June. At that time we had been surprised to discover not only that the Three Powers were too weak, but that they were also concerned that the Soviet Union might possibly use the uprising to move beyond the eastern sector and invade the western sectors, for it took the deployment of Soviet tanks to crush the uprising. At that time I was editor-in-chief of RIAS, and I vividly remember receiving my first and only orders from my American Director. The insurgents had sent a deputation to my office, saying that RIAS should issue a call for a general strike 'in the Zone', as it used to be known. Needless to say, we were unable to do that — an American broadcasting station, of course, could not call for an uprising or a general strike in territory occupied by the Soviet Union. We could not say that, however, and so I asked them just to tell us what they wanted. And then they set out their demands, and we sat down in my office and arranged these into a logical sequence and formulated them in proper German. We then broadcast them. Moreover, on the night of 16 to 17 June, they all went home, having arranged to meet again in Strausberger Platz at six or seven the following morning. We broadcast that, too. Then the American Director arrived with his whiskers quivering and said, 'Must stop immediately!' I said, 'Why? We are only broadcasting what the ...' 'No, it must stop! Suppose the Russians intervene' — we didn't realise it at the time, but in fact they intervened the following day — 'can you guarantee that they will not keep on rolling into West Berlin?' I said, 'I can't guarantee that, but it would be politically unthinkable.' Then he said, 'There is no need to discuss this any further. The High Commissioner, Ambassador Conan, phoned to ask me whether RIAS was out to start the Third World War.' End of discussion. The offending information was dropped from our broadcasts.

Of course, all of that was still in our minds, and the Americans' concern that they were too weak and that the Soviet Union could present them with a *fait accompli* was one side of the coin. The other side — something which was not so clear to us at the time — was that status quo thinking was undoubtedly a factor influencing the conduct of the Three Powers in 1953. The status quo was the division of the city and the division of the country, even though there was no wall yet — that was added in 1961. What happened in 1961 is what had happened in theory in 1953, albeit invisibly. It had been possible to move back and forth between East and West Berlin to have a haircut, to fall in love, to marry and even to work in the other part of the city, and then that situation arose. Throughout the whole time, of course, we were ... I had the Cold War mentality and was fully focused ... on defence. Our thoughts did not go beyond that. And then, when the Wall was built, it came as a shock, not only because the Three Powers stood by and watched, but also because they made no effort, took no action that might have prevented it. On the contrary, they obeyed the orders of the Interior Minister of the German Democratic Republic, which supposedly did not exist at all and which the Three Powers had not recognised, who decreed that, with immediate effect, Allied vehicles were to use only three streets. The three crossing points were subsequently reduced to only one — Checkpoint Charlie in Friedrichstraße, which later assumed legendary status.

It got even worse. We had wonderful students. Recalling what had recently happened in Algiers, the students said that whatever the Algerians could do, they could do too. They could use plastic explosives. They could blast the thing sky-high faster than anyone over there could rebuild it. And then in the Senate we received instructions to deploy our own police to protect the Wall. There must on no account be any incidents. That was a truly bitter pill to swallow. And thereafter, of course, came the attempts to go over the Wall. Our legal position was that there was a quadripartite status. Every citizen on either side of the street was allowed to cross the street. Now, suddenly, unauthorised people over there were wearing uniforms and carrying weapons — Germans were forbidden to carry weapons in Berlin — and were firing them when our citizens tried to come to our part of the city. That is a crime! Normally, the police are there to prevent crime. This means that our police should have provided covering fire. The task of our police should have been to

fire in order to enforce the rights of those who wanted to come to West Berlin. Instead, the rules of engagement on our side were that arms could only be used for self-defence, in other words in the event of a direct attack, and only if shots had been fired at our side. In normal circumstances, then, the public prosecutor's office would have been required to haul the Senate in front of a judge for failing to provide assistance. But they did not do it, because they knew full well that it was the result of Allied orders. That was the reality of the Cold War. Just that. And so the Wall came to be built, and no one helped us to get rid of it. Kennedy wrote to Brandt that 'the only way to get rid of the Wall would be to go to war, which you do not want either'. He then added that Brandt must not overlook the fact that the Wall was a sign which essentially reflected badly on the idea of world communism. It was impossible, in principle, for the communists to proclaim the aim of winning over the entire world while having to wall in their own population.

At that time, in 1961, we regarded this to some extent as a placebo, but as time wore on, it became apparent that Kennedy had been right. This wall was indeed a crushing defeat, and it remained a defeat, too. However, that did not help us. We had to realise that no one was going to help us even to make the Wall more permeable. In short, we came to the conclusion that, if nobody was going to help us, we had to start reflecting on ways of making the Wall more permeable in order to enable people to cross to the other side again, perhaps for a matter of hours, so that they could see their relatives and acquaintances once more. Heavens above, we might even see the occasional wedding between residents of East and West Berlin once again. In other words, if that was our aim, we had to negotiate with those who had the power to issue passes. That, in fact, was the first taboo to be broken. The attitude up to that point had been that there could be no negotiating with prison guards, that the GDR did not exist; it was all nothingness. The second taboo to be broken was that these negotiations were not to be conducted with the local East Berlin administration, the municipal council in the old red-brick City Hall, the *Rotes Rathaus*, but with the Government of the German Democratic Republic, a title we were not even allowed to use at that stage. When we had reached this decision, we then began to reflect on the things we should have to consider if such negotiations were to take place. First of all, we must not infringe the rights of the Three Powers, for the permanent victors' rights they enjoyed in Berlin remained our only protection. Accordingly, we had to proceed in such a way that the Three Powers would give their consent. We also had to obtain the support of the Federal Government, of course, as far as possible. We could not conclude an international agreement. We could not act as though West Berlin were a separate political entity, distinct from the Federal Republic — a third German state, as it were. In short, we had to fulfil all sorts of impossible conditions. I then spent two weekends with a few people in Axel Springer's house in Schwanenwerder deliberating on the theoretical aspects of the matter in a kind of seminar format. When the plan came to fruition and a letter arrived addressed to Mr Brandt, Mayor of West Berlin — I believe it was from the deputy premier of the German Democratic Republic, Alexander Abusch — we could have said 'no' and delivered an insult. But we did not say 'no'. That was it. The letter was answered, and the result was negotiations about passes, which made the impossible possible and served us well again at a later date, for we had not been able to reach agreement as to who we were. We were the Senate of Berlin, not of West Berlin. They were not the Government of the German Democratic Republic but administrative authorities. Enough said!

The crucial breakthrough came when the Deputy Mayor or Senator for Internal Affairs, Heinrich Albertz, who was by profession a minister of the church, came up with a safeguard clause, as befits the role of a pastor: 'Agreement could not be reached on the designations of offices, places or authorities.' But agreement was reached on the fact that we wanted passes. The Albertz formula was used again during the Four Power negotiations in Berlin, because I told Kissinger that their three ambassadors could go on negotiating there for months and would not reach agreement on how our status should be defined. Forget all this legalese, I told him. We have no doubt that you are competent and that you have rights, so talk about the real issue, namely unrestricted freedom of movement. That is precisely what they did, and we obtained an unusual, splendid and wonderful accord, the Quadripartite Agreement. Its wording does not even state what the agreement is about. The word 'Berlin' is not even mentioned, but no one doubted what it was about, namely movement between here and there. To that extent, it was a forerunner, if you like, a little exercise or tactical game in preparation for subsequent issues of greater import. It was an attempt to provide a local solution to alleviate local distress. Even so, it was the subject of passionate debate. The Deputy Mayor from the CDU took the view that the wound must remain open, while Brandt's attitude was that politics could go to hell if

it did not benefit the people. Small steps are better than big talk. But let me re-emphasise that it was a local issue. Two years later, when Brandt was in a position to develop national policies, he very carefully crafted a major speech presenting his new and different approach to the foreign policy of the Federal Republic as well as to its security policy and its policy towards the East. In that context I was asked to contribute to the discussion, which I could only do by taking a point from the Brandt speech and spelling out what it would mean in practice for the two German states. Out of that came the formula 'change through rapprochement'. It was basically a method for approaching others if we want something from them. It was not a strategy. The strategy was still being developed, a process that was continued by the Policy Planning Staff under the Grand Coalition from 1966 to 1969.