

Farewell to the Cold War?

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In the history of the SPD, support for its policies has never been greater than during Willy Brandt's Ostpolitik and efforts at de-escalation. It was the time when the SPD managed to align people's yearning for peace and reconciliation with real political necessities. Far more frequently, however, Germany's Social Democrats have suffered from the tensions between their objective of a world without war or arms and the reality of violence, weapons and hatred. This trouble with the contradictions between what "is" and what "should be" is typical of the SPD.

In my speech at the 1979 SPD party congress in Berlin, which deliberated and set policy on the issue of medium-range nuclear weapons, I said: "The practice of Social Democracy is the policy of peace; otherwise, it would stop being Social Democratic policy." Any Social Democrat could back such a statement. Yet arguments raged for years thereafter on the genuine political consequences to be derived from this sentence.

In his book, Jan Hansen analyzes the conflicts arising from the NATO double-track decision. This dispute was not the first and definitely not the last over the priorities of Social Democratic peace policy. A comparable brawl threatened to break out within the party in the 1990 over the conflicts in former Yugoslavia. In light of these disputes of



earlier decades I consider the SPD's relatively unified response to the current tensions and conflicts in the Middle East and along the EU's and NATO's eastern and southern frontiers exceptionally gratifying. An important reason for this unity is, in my opinion, the work of Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, which e.g. toward Russia is clearly based on democratic values, international legal norms and peace objectives yet keeps seeking solutions in a pragmatic dialogue with Moscow and Kiev.

Jan Hansen's intention is "to 'historicize' the debate over rearmament and previous research on it." He endeavors to achieve this by taking an "alien perspective." Both, in my opinion, are done with great success. If I comment on him now, I can do so only by taking a historicizing perspective, toward his findings and myself and my own conduct and thinking at the time. Meanwhile, I remain aware of my role as an eyewitness, i.e. I also analyze former events and decisions through my memories of my perspective in those days.

These various perspectives – as Hansen rightly notes – have consequences for terminology. From today's view the Cold War ended with the fall of the Wall and dissolution of the Soviet Union. A new conflict with Russia began a few years ago. It differs significantly from the time treated in Hansen's book, however. Compared with the Cold War, the strategic and ideological framework of this "new East-West conflict" is completely different. Therefore the methods for de-escalating the current conflict must also be adapted to the new situation.



During the 1980's rearmament controversy, the antagonistic phase of the East-West conflict, the so-called Cold War, was distinguished from the period of détente, which followed. From the late 1970s, when the NATO double-track decision was up for debate, to the early 1980s, after Ronald Reagan became President of the United States, the SPD sought to prevent Europe from sliding into a new phase of the Cold War. The party wanted, instead, to introduce a second phase of détente. For the SPD at the time, then, completely overcoming the East-West conflict was not a short-term but a long-term goal, to be achieved within the space of decades, if then.

Up to this point my analysis is the same as Jan Hansen's. Unlike Hansen, I doubt that the intellectual categories of the East-West conflict were already eroding during the rearmament crisis. In my opinion at that point it was rather a matter of choosing between a cooperative or a confrontational treatment of the conflict.

Unlike some of us younger foreign policy specialists, Egon Bahr always supported excluding ideological issues from the dialogue with our Eastern European negotiating partners. That stance was based on his experiences in intergovernmental negotiations with East Germany and the USSR. Excluding issues of ideology and values was possible and sensible regarding topics surrounding arms policy and especially when negotiating over weapons of mass destruction.



These arms, and especially nuclear weapons, embodied the military and thus power political aspect of the East-West conflict. As far as the issue of nuclear disarmament was concerned, for Social Democrats and most of the peace movement, there was no ideological difference between the US and the Soviet Union. Both nuclear powers could annihilate each other and take Europe and Germany with them.

However, this symmetry between the two superpowers changed immediately once the fates of dissidents and human rights activists entered the picture. Here, some of the same groups and individuals demanding unilateral trust-building concessions in disarmament from the West accused Egon Bahr of being a "leftist Metternich." In other words, the rights-and-values dimension of the East-West conflict was an incontrovertible element in this part of the Western peace movement. The issue seemed non-negotiable during the Cold War. Only with the 1975 CSCE Final Act did the two otherwise diametrically opposed systems agree on common human rights principles.

The Social Democrats could not identify with the paradigms of the Cold War. Yet I doubt that Hansen is justified in remarking that "the concept of the West shifted into the realm of the politically negotiable" (p. 83). I, too, considered hostile stereotypes as something to be overcome (p. 85). To me, however, this in no way signified equidistance to the values represented by the West and the Soviets. Personally, it was always a matter of emphasizing the dissimilarity of these values. In my many conversations with Eastern European Communists as an SPD youth member and later in the Bundestag, I did not exclude the topic of



differing societal orders and divergent ideologies – on the contrary. However, my conversations were also not part of any intergovernmental negotiations.

Peter Bender's formulation quoted by Hansen (p. 87) of a "de-ideologization of the East and a de-ideologization of the Western image of the East" applies to the extent that many East European Communists believed less and less in their own doctrine. Western Europeans, on the other hand, displayed no such emancipation from their own ideological communities (as the passage by Bender and quoted by Hansen asserts). This became clear after the fall of the Wall, when the East became more Western while the West refused to become more like the East.

This also brings me to a differing evaluation of the talks between the SPD and SED on the "Dispute of Ideologies and Joint Security." This paper did not relativize the ideological controversies. But it pluralized their contrast. The paper legitimized the equal discourse regarding the contrasting ideologies of Social Democrats and Communists. For a system like that of East Germany, which derived its raison d'être from ideological antagonism, this represented a greater risk than it was to West Germany, which defined itself per se as pluralistic. At the time I considered the disarmament negotiations with the SED leadership – not least because I took part in them – as more important than Erhard Eppler's talks regarding the conflict of ideologies. Today I tend rather to accord Eppler's efforts greater significance for the peaceful transition of the late 1980s.



In this context it should be noted that because of the fixation on relations between the two German states, the question remains unexplored of whether the SPD's abundant contacts and conversations since the mid-1980s with Communists in Hungary, Poland – and after 1989 with Romania, Bulgaria and others – benefited and paved the way for the change from Communist to Social Democratic parties.

It cannot be denied that a certain anti-Americanism has always existed in Germany and within the SPD. The topic of nuclear weapons – to which German politicians had no access to, of course – explains in this context the tendency toward equidistance. Yet the protests against the NATO double-track decision remained relatively circumscribed during the Carter presidency. Only once Ronald Reagan took his place did they grow into mass demonstrations. Were they then protests against a certain American policy or anti-American protests? Helmut Schmidt did not have a high opinion of Jimmy Carter. Schmidt's speech at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London did more than criticize Soviet medium-range nuclear arms. It also expressed doubts over the credibility of US nuclear deterrence. Ronald Reagan's disposition toward Social Democrats was at least as negative as that of the Social Democrats toward Reagan. Was Reagan therefore anti-European?

Jan Hansen's analysis of the changes in Social Democratic political culture in the wake of the actions and discussion in the peace movement is, in my opinion, exceptionally engrossing and persuasive. I actively participated in these changes and considered myself to be part of the peace movement. I supported it within my party and, simultaneously,



suffered from it. The protest movements at the time surely contributed to the democratization of political culture in Germany. Yet the demand of most peaceniks for unilateral disarmament measures as a way of moving the Soviets to follow suit was based on a completely mistaken reading of Soviet policy. Petra Kelly's endorsement of the "Krefeld Appeal," which directed concrete disarmament demands only at the West, was something I considered inexcusable.

When, on page 174, Hansen quotes me from a recording of a conversation of mine in 1981 with members of the US peace movement, in which they describe me as "almost pragmatic to a fault," I must have restrained myself greatly indeed. By that time I was still favorably disposed toward the peace movement and its means of action, yet found its tangible arms control demands, which grew increasingly distant from negotiated concepts and instead called for unilateral disarmament steps, less and less acceptable.

Many of the wounds that Social Democrats inflicted on one another at the time have only recently healed. For a long time it was hardly likely that Helmut Schmidt would be enthusiastically applauded at an SPD party congress. Intriguingly, today it is positively regarded across the SPD that an SPD foreign minister shows a commitment to negotiated settlements of the conflicts in Eastern Europe, the Middle East and along the EU's southern periphery. That also eases the historicized perception of earlier controversies. It may well be that Helmut Schmidt was not justified in all his reasons for the NATO double-track decision. He did, however, gain vindication from the results of disarmament



negotiations, even though German politicians and Helmut Schmidt personally had only very limited influence on Soviet negotiating policy under Gorbachev and US policy under Reagan.

Ultimately it was intergovernmental negotiations, and not the peace movement, that prevented the stationing of medium-range nuclear arms. Yet the peace movement successfully changed political culture within the SPD as well as in Germany in general. The majority of peaceniks did not believe negotiations would succeed, but the pressure they exerted surely aided the talks' success.

At the time the dispute over arms expansion threatened to tear the SPD apart. Today I see no reason to repeat that past polarization, and many good reasons – just like Jan Hansen does – to consign those controversies to history.

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