

A chapter of history that Germany's 'post-communists' want people to forget

by Angelika Beyreuther-Raimondi

The Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) has devoted a great deal of attention this spring to the 50th anniversary of its forced merger, in the Soviet Occupation Zone, with the Communist Party of Germany (KPD), on April 20-21, 1946. This resulted in the formation of the Socialist Unity Party (SED), which became the ruling party of communist East Germany (the so-called German Democratic Republic). The forced unification of the two parties resulted in the imprisonment and/or death of tens of thousands of Social Democrats in communist concentration camps.

For 50 years, this has been a historical legacy that many Social Democrats in the western part of Germany have preferred to ignore.

The issue is particularly vital today, because of the growing political influence in reunified Germany of the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), the new name assumed by the SED after the 1989 reunification of Germany. In the October 1994 federal elections, the PDS won 30 seats in the Bundestag (parliament), out of a total of 600. They have a base of 20% or more in state legislatures in all of the eastern states, and their support is growing, as a result of the disastrous free-trade economic policies of the Bonn government. In 1994, the PDS won 19.9% in legislative elections in the state of Sachsen-Anhalt. In October 1995, they won 30% in Berlin. There are discussions ongoing in many German states about electoral alliances and other forms of collaboration between the SPD and PDS.

Given the sordid history of the forced unification in 1946 and its aftermath, such collaboration, with a party that has in no way repudiated its past, is immoral and dangerous. On the other hand, the discussion of historical truth about these matters is helpful, if sanity is to prevail in the SPD in Germany today.

Politicians and historians from all political parties are participating in discussions on this theme. At the City Hall of the "Reds" in former communist east Berlin, the Historical Commission of the SPD held a meeting on March 14-15; the SPD party directorate held an April 20 event to commemorate the victims of the union of the two parties, at the same Berlin Metropol Theater where the forced merger originally occurred; on April 22, the SPD-affiliated Friedrich Ebert Foundation's Historical Dialogue Circle held an event in Bonn, inviting eyewitnesses and historians of the merger to participate.

Such discussions were not always sanctioned by the SPD in recent decades. When the SPD launched its *Ostpolitik* at the end of the 1960s—the policy of détente toward the communist East—the party ignored or attempted to downplay this brutal history. In a 1987 joint SPD-SED paper, "The Conflict of Ideologies and Mutual Security," mention of the forced merger was omitted altogether. Only since 1989 has the issue been raised at all within the SPD. In his keynote speech at the March 14-15 Berlin event, the chairman of the SPD Historical Commission, Prof. Dr. Faulenbach, admonished the audience that "the victims of this dictatorship cannot ever be forgotten; insofar as this is a question of being conscious of our history and historical culture."

The 'birth-defect' of the PDS

The SPD vice-chairman, Wolfgang Thierse, appealed to the forum in Berlin: "The congenital defect of the PDS lies in the fact that the undemocratic actions by which the SED was founded, and therefore its birth-defect, is carried over, since it didn't cause the SED to make a clean break and a new start. A party which never met democratic criteria should have been terminated by being *disbanded*. Each former member could then have freely decided whether or not to be free of party affiliation, or to become a Social Democrat, a Communist, a Left-Socialist, or, as far as I am concerned, a Free Democrat; or, even to seek to found a new party. With an eye to membership numbers, the apparatus, membership dues, wealth, real estate, and publishing organs, [Hans] Modrow [the last East German prime minister, now an honorary chairman of the PDS] and [Gregor] Gysi [the first chairman of the PDS, now a Member of Parliament and honorary chairman of the party] have not taken this step. For this reason, the PDS has *never* to this day been a normal party. Whoever reads the explanations, page-by-page, of the PDS historians, really has to get the impression that what they are dancing on eggs about, while equivocating between the desire for renewal and for gratification, arises out of a persisting nostalgia for the SED."

Thierse quoted the explanation of the PDS Historical Commission, which avoided using the term "forced union," but admitted that "without any doubt, force was used," opponents of the merger had been placed "under coercion," and dismissed the matter by saying that "the most severe means of repression" were rooted in the Cold War. The PDS paper



The unification of the Social Democratic Party and the Communist Party in Germany is symbolized by two converging columns of marchers in 1946. Communist leader Walter Ulbricht's motto was that the forced merger "must appear to be democratic; however, we have to have everything in our hands."

carried the simple headline "On the 50th Anniversary of the KPD and SPD Merger." The principal author of this PDS explanation, Prof. Günter Benser, wrote in April 1976 (while he was an SED man): "The opponents of the SED have never gotten tired of falsifying and distorting the creation of a united Marxist worker's party, because the victory of the unity movement was a defeat for them, which they have not gotten over, even up to this day. The shallowness of the slanders that claim that violence and repression had been the midwives of the SED's birth, may find the most powerful documentary proof in contemporary pictures and documents."

Consolidation of the communist regime

On April 30, 1945, there landed in the vicinity of Frankfurt-on-Oder, a military outfit that came from Moscow. Ten German Communists, known as the "Ulbricht Group," returned to Germany, the first of three Soviet-emigré KPD cadre groups. A few days later, additional "KPD initiative groups" landed in Saxony and Mecklenburg. All three spearhead groups were under the command of the Soviet Military Administration in Germany (SMAD). Their assigned objectives: establishing of a German administrative apparatus in the Soviet Occupied Zone (SOZ), and practical means of influencing the course of events in Germany in accordance with Stalin's commands.

Comrade Walter Ulbricht enunciated the motto clearly:

"It must appear to be democratic; however, we have to have everything in our hands."

On June 10, 1945 the head of the Soviet Occupation Army Group, Marshal Georgi Zhukov, issued Order No. 2, which would permit the founding, or perhaps re-founding, of political parties in the SOZ. One day later, on June 11, 1945, the Central Committee of the KPD officially took up its work in the SOZ and disseminated the "It must appear to be democratic; however . . ." founding call, within which a "parliamentary-democratic republic with all democratic rights and freedoms for the people" was promised. The Communists recognized "that the path of forcing the Soviet system upon Germany would be wrong, since this path does not correspond to the *present* conditions of development in Germany" (emphasis added).

A great number of SPD functionaries had illusions about the intentions of the Communists. Among these were the leader of the Social Democracy in the SOZ, Otto Grotewohl, plus the majority of the members in the Central Committee of the SPD in Berlin. In opposition to Kurt Schumacher, the SPD's first chairman in the western occupation zone and a tough anti-communist, they championed an eastward orientation for Germany, with the argument that, "We can get help from the Soviet Union, never from England and America." A memorandum worked out under the controlling influence of the national-bolshevist Ernst Niekisch attacked "two imperi-

alisms”: a classical-Western imperialism which would suppress the German economy for reasons of competition, versus a Soviet imperialism which would offer a more sympathetic understanding to the reconstruction of the German economy, due to its own country having been laid waste.

The road to the SPD-KPD merger

Perhaps the decisive reason that the unification of workers' parties was accelerated in every way by the KPD and the SMAD, from the fall of 1945 on, was the increasing strength of the SPD, and its concomitant developing self-confidence. The leadership of the Soviet military administration had become convinced that because of the growing strength of the Social Democracy, the KPD would lose the municipal and state-legislative elections planned for 1946. The electoral defeats of the Communists in Austria and Hungary and the very strong electoral showings in those places for the Social Democracy, confirmed those fears. At the end of November 1945, eighty-five representatives of the Austrian People's Party, 76 Socialists, and just 4 Communists entered Austria's national assembly in Vienna!

As the numbers stood in the SOZ in spring 1946, there were about 700,000 SPD members, compared to a KPD membership of around 600,000. Following consultation of the military council of the SMAD, directly with Stalin, the SMAD took the fallback strategy to achieve the union of the workers' parties inside their zone of occupation, no later than May 1946.

Despite the “democratic” tones in the founding charter of the KPD, as far as Ulbricht and Pieck, the leaders of the KPD, were concerned, neither was the party's bolshevistic conception to be questioned, nor were the Social Democrats considered to be real partners. As the concept was conveyed by one of the Moscow cadre in 1944: “We must ourselves have a hand in the creation of such a Social Democracy, if it is to collaborate with us.”

The methods were multi-layered: force, intimidation, and repression of Social Democrats not willing to submit to unity, but also all kinds of favoritism and inducements for those who would go along with it. As a means of pressure which was utilized against many SPD functionaries, their sons continued to be interned in prisoner-of-war camps in the Soviet Union. In Thüringia, the SMAD forced Hermann Brill, the chairman of the state SPD association and a unification opponent, to resign from his office, replacing him with unification-advocate Heinrich Hoffmann. To quote Brill: “Already, on the second day after liberation [from the Buchenwald concentration camp] I was forced to recognize that the KPD hadn't changed at all.”

On March 31, 1946, a referendum took place among Social Democrats in the western sector of Berlin. An overwhelming majority of 82% of the SPD members voted *against* the union. In Berlin's eastern sector and in the SOZ, the Soviet garrison force permitted no elections.

Before his flight to the West later that same day, Hans Hermsdorf, the Social Democratic mayor of Chemnitz, wrote a farewell letter to his regional chairman. Hermsdorf stood in opposition to the Social Democratic functionaries in his party's state executive board and within its Central Committee in Berlin, who had sold out to taking the path of subjugation: “In no part of the entire Soviet Zone can one speak any longer about any free expression of our colleagues' wills. Unity shall be made uniform, and woe to those who permit themselves to have any other opinion. He is a traitor, a saboteur, and look at all the lovely words we've adopted here from the Nazis over the last few weeks. I stress yet again: Out of disdain for even the most elementary fundamental principles, unity will be decreed and carried out, without affording the membership the right to freely decide, since the vote by acclamation is, after all, theater, like what was carried out previously in the Sports Palace [under Hitler]. In the last few weeks, I have fought through an arduous inner struggle within myself, but under this assumption: that a deserting of democracy means I am forced to accept all of the consequences upon myself and to relinquish my offices. . . . Every forced union always contains within itself the germ of its own eventual dissolution, and therefore I know, that if our courageous colleagues, who at this moment are being forcibly driven into unity, at some future day should again have the right to freely decide democratically, they would immediately revolt against the KPD's terror, and once more unfurl the banner of the Social Democracy.”

Kurt Schumacher, the SPD chairman in the western zones, refused to take the course that Otto Grotewohl took in the East. Said Schumacher, in his closing remarks at the SPD party congress in Hanover in May 1946: “The party congress of the Social Democratic Party condemns the surrender carried out by the Berlin SPD Central Committee of the Social Democratic Party in the eastern zone to the Communist Party. . . . The party congress deplores to the utmost the conduct of leading Social Democrats in the eastern zone, who by their opportunism gave assistance to the Communists' efforts to achieve the leveling of opposition into political conformity, and who have brought about a severe moral conflict of conscience within the Social Democratic membership.”

With the constituting of the Socialist Unity Party on April 21-22, 1946, the SPD ceased to exist in the eastern zone; it had previously constituted the party with the largest membership in Germany. Of the approximately 1.2 million members of the SED, about 53% came out of the SPD. The “Banner of the Social Democracy” would not again be unfurled in East Germany until 43 years later.

‘The Communists are our enemies!’

In 1946, with reference to Shumacher's fierce and repeated attacks against the Communists and against the policy of the Soviet occupation forces, an American general said in a speech: “Do not forget that the Soviets are our allies!”

Schumacher answered abruptly and boldly: "Do not forget, General, that the Communists are our enemies!"

For Kurt Schumacher, the Communists were "red-lacquered Nazis." Long before, in his 1932 *Lübeck Message to the People*, he came to the conclusion that "National Socialism and communism have, after all, exchanged so many bacilli; they have mutually infected each other; the oscillation back and forth of certain strata between both parties is a fact." Already, only a few weeks after the war's end, Schumacher had made himself unmistakably clear: "As a political idea in theory and praxis, the Communist Party is just as utterly discredited as Nazism and militarism. From the standpoint of German politics, there exists no compelling reason for its continued existence. The Social Democracy has as little reason to donate blood to transfuse to the KP's enfeebled body, as it does for entering into any kind of demonstration of friendship to it." To the question, weren't Social Democrats and Communists actually brothers? Schumacher's terse retort: "Cain and Abel were brothers, too."

Schumacher supported the resistance of 100,000 Social Democrats in the Soviet-occupied part of Germany against the forced union of the SPD and KPD. "We fundamentally do not see the KP as a German class-party, but rather a party of a foreign state," was Schumacher's formulation, in a resolution passed by the SPD branch in the British occupation

zone on Jan. 4, 1946 at Hanover. It went further: "Within the Social Democratic membership, there lives the irrepressible recognition that the KP is superfluous, that, with the Nazi dictatorship, the idea and praxis of every dictatorship has been totally discredited, and that the Communist Party no longer has a sociological or political place within the German party system. It is solely a conspicuous agency of a foreign power and has no sense of expressing the will of any segment of the German people."

The resistance

After the unifying of the parties into the SED was accomplished, the struggle became even more bitter. According to estimates of the SPD's former East Bureau (which would signal its resolve to shift to a new conciliatory policy toward the East in 1971), during the December 1945 to April 1946 interval, when preparations for the founding the SED were under way, 20,000 Social Democrats resisting the forced unification, had disciplinary action taken against them. With the transformation of the SED into a "party of a new type" in 1948, and its subsequent bolshevization, "Social Democracy" would then not only be denounced as politically and morally reprehensible, but it would even be criminally prosecuted. The basic principles of the SED's personnel policy were laid down in July 1948: that there can be no place in the government for "Schumacher agents, spies, and saboteurs." These "elements" were to be "unmasked" and dismissed—or worse.

Hermann Kreutzer and the Kurt Schumacher Club in Berlin give the following figures: In addition to the 20,000 Social Democrats who lost their positions and jobs, there were around 100,000 who fled to the West. Five thousand Social Democrats were handed over "to be dealt with administratively by the NKVD"—i.e., the SED delivered up 5,000 Social Democrats to the Soviet secret police and military tribunals for judgment to be passed upon them. Four hundred perished in the concentration camps and penitentiaries in the Soviet Zone and in Soviet gulags. Immediately following their release from prison, 1,000 died as a result of prison treatment.

It was even worse. At an SPD congress in April 1961 of former political prisoners under the SED-ruled state, it was made public that from 1945 until the start of 1961, over 70,000 Germans perished in internment camps and prisons. At the same congress, then-Mayor of West Berlin Willy Brandt said: "Our countrymen in the Zone have carried out—by their valor, their perseverance, by all the indications that they have given that they did not bow down, and did not support this regime—a duty which lay in the interest of our whole people. By the measure of our history, this is an achievement, for which we in the Federal Republic can only be grateful."

That achievement, and that sacrifice, should be burned into the hearts and minds of those who are now making back-room political deals with the PDS.

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