

'Virtual sovereignty for Eastern Zone' from Die Welt (12 October 1949)

Caption: On 12 October 1949, the German newspaper Die Welt considers the proclamation, in East Berlin, of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and analyses the ambiguous relations between the Soviet occupation forces and the civil authorities in the new GDR.

Source: Die Welt. Unabhängige Tageszeitung. Hrsg. Küstermeier, Rudolf ; R Herausgeber Scherer, Hans. 12.10.1949, Nr. 165; 4. Jg. Hamburg: Die Welt. "Ostzonale Quasi-Souveränität", p. 2.

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Virtual sovereignty for the Eastern Zone

Berlin's Eastern Sector is witnessing the astoundingly rapid unreeling of the film entitled 'The Making of a People's Democracy'. The second act was shown on Monday: the proclamation of the new political status, made at a meeting of the Presidium of the People's Chamber, attended by Prime Minister designate, Otto Grotewohl, together with General Zhukov. The third act followed on Tuesday: the appointment of the highest authorities of the newly created People's Democracy. The work can begin. One might be tempted to say: good luck!

What does the political status, reinvented for the Eastern Zone, entail? General Zhukov announced that the era of Soviet Russian military administration had come to an end. It would be replaced by the Soviet Russian Control Commission, a non-military authority. That means that this is an exact repetition of what occurred in the Federal Republic some time ago: the dissolution of the military government and the subsequent creation of a body, representing the occupying powers, set out to control the activities of the most powerful German government authorities.

Once this reorganisation had taken place in the West, the Soviet Union was left with no other option but to take similar steps. It was impossible to maintain the principle of a military government, intended only for a preliminary period, once hostilities had ceased.

However, the fact that General Zhukov and the other politicians from the Eastern Zone continue to hurl increasing abuse at Bonn and the institutions founded there must mean that what is currently happening in Berlin's Eastern Sector cannot bear the slightest resemblance to the Bonn structure. So, what lies behind this new status? If we are to be honest, latest announcements have left us none the wiser.

There is a parliamentary constitution, which, however, was violated immediately it was put into force. At the meeting on Monday, both the German politicians and General Zhukov spent much time speaking about Potsdam and other Four-Power Agreements which are intended to form the basis for the Eastern Zone's new political order. They placed particular emphasis on the importance of the Potsdam Agreement, although it is precisely this document that contains hardly anything that might be of interest in this case.

The Potsdam Agreement merely provided the framework within which the renewal of the German state was to take place. How relations to the authorities were going to be stabilised and brought back to normal remained unresolved even after the Potsdam Conference. The Potsdam Agreement makes no mention of who was to be master of the house in the future and not just during the period following capitulation.

So who is now master of the Eastern Zone? A sentence taken from the address given by the President of the People's Chamber Presidium, addressed to General Zhukov, does provide some clues. In it, the Chamber's President asks the General to give the Prime Minister designate, Otto Grotewohl, the opportunity to inform him, Zhukov, about 'the political motives behind our actions and the aim of our work, for the adoption of which we require your approval. This task will be carried out by Mr Grotewohl, with Zhukov's permission.'

It was with these words that the President of the People's Chamber sought the General's blessing for the launch of the Grotewohl Government. This was not just metaphorical. It was only after the General had given his consent that his words formed the constitutional act justifying the government's existence; otherwise the words uttered by the President of the Chamber would be meaningless.

This is where the ways of Eastern Zone policy part from those taken by the German politicians in Bonn. The new German public law laid down in the Bonn Constitution and the Statute of Occupation, including the Statute's supplementary documents, have included the division of Germany's sovereignty rights as a transitional measure. The Bundestag and the highest authorities derived from it will be the institutions responsible for certain areas of political life; the Allied High Council will be responsible for other areas. This does mean, however, that the highest German authorities do not possess total sovereignty. Nevertheless, they do participate in the exercise of their sovereignty rights on a considerable scale and to a clearly defined extent.

The right to elect the Federal Chancellor lies solely with the Bundestag. This is one of the sovereignty rights reserved for German authorities. The Chancellor performs his duties by virtue of being elected by the Bundestag and by virtue of his consequent nomination by the Federal President. His appointment does not require recognition by the High Commissioners.

The situation in the Eastern Zone is different. It does not recognise the Statute of Occupation nor the clear division of sovereignty rights between the Eastern Zone government and the Soviet Russian Control Commission. According to the constitution of the People's Council, the exercise of sovereignty rights seems to be carried out only by German authorities. Nevertheless, the first Minister-President of the Eastern Zone is required to request recognition of appointment by General Zhukov. This was requested, because it had to be requested if the government was to come to power at all. Zhukov's right to grant recognition of appointment is contrary to the constitution of the People's Council.

The way in which the new government is being installed is therefore tantamount to a further violation of the Constitution. This is the second violation since the People's Democracy was introduced in the Eastern Zone. This constitutional violation reveals the nature of this political status, newly created in the Eastern Zone. It reveals what distinguishes this status from the institutions in Bonn.

Whilst a clear division of sovereignty has taken place in the Federal Republic of Germany, a virtual sovereignty is being put into place in the Eastern Zone. It is an 'as-if' sovereignty. The Eastern Zone government is acting as if it were an independent government. In truth, it is a government that has gained its authority not through the will of a Chamber that resulted from a constitutional violation but by violating the constitution to win General Zhukov's approval. This means that General Zhukov has remained what he was, the master of the Soviet Zone.

When one has served one's purpose ...

The anti-Fascist, democratic order set up in the Eastern part of Germany has brought true freedom and democracy to the German people. The aim of making the administration of the state the responsibility of the broad masses has been achieved and has thereby fulfilled the mission set out by the Soviet military administration in Germany. Democratic Germany will, once it has fully and irrevocably joined the anti-imperialist camp, enjoy the full support of the Soviet people and all the other peoples of the Democratic countries. The Soviet people will support the strengthening of economic and political relations between both countries, based on the most-favoured-nation principle in trade and economic transactions.

Rightist tendencies

The appearance of the 'Verband der Unabhängigen' (VdU, League of Independents) is an interesting phenomenon but one that can hardly be described as a threat. The association's success can be put down in part to a general move towards the right on the European continent.

Oppression by the Nazis and 'liberation' by the Russians have taught the Austrian people that it is better for two rival parties to be tolerant of one another and to work together than to let vicious internal quarrels clear the way for a dictatorship.

Let it be revealed!

The most striking aspect of the parliamentary elections in Austria has been the rise in support for the neo-Fascist 'Verband der Unabhängigen'. It is, however, better that the Nazi elements come to the surface now rather than forming a clandestine underground movement or hiding behind another party. It may be hoped that the two government parties will collaborate even more closely in future.

Things can easily go wrong!

The Western powers should carefully note the results of the parliamentary elections in Austria. A nationalist party with militant tendencies has secured many votes. This shows that there is a proportion of Germans who still like to play soldiers.

The Soviets have set up a police force of some 300 000 men in their zone. Why should the Western powers not do something similar in West Germany?