

Interview with Egon Bahr: the Allied reaction to the new Ostpolitik (Metz, 10 June 2006)

Source: Interview d'Egon Bahr / EGON BAHR, François Klein, prise de vue : François Fabert.- Metz: CVCE [Prod.], 10.06.2006. CVCE, Sanem. - VIDEO (00:07:02, Couleur, Son original).

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URL:

http://www.cvce.eu/obj/interview_with_egon_bahr_the_allied_reaction_to_the_new_ostpolitik_metz_10_june_2006-en-30a83114-9ff0-47e5-96c9-fb53d3d3c55e.html



Last updated: 05/07/2016

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[François Klein] How did the Federal Republic's Western Allies react to this policy?

[Egon Bahr] Well, in slightly different ways. First I explained, clarified and argued this policy to Henry Kissinger, President Nixon's then security advisor, in Washington, and he was very suspicious. He was ... it is understandable, when the Germans start to make moves, to talk to the Russians again, that is always ... oh well. And then I told him that I had not come to Washington to consult but to inform. We know what we want and we will do it! Working in close contact, in close agreement! And today I still think it is greatly to the Americans' credit that they allowed that. After all, they could have prevented us. We would not and could not have done it against the Americans' will. The only way I can explain it is that they must have said to themselves 'So it seems there is no risk. After all, we have the power and the Russians know we have the power. So let those madmen have a go at persuading the Soviet Union to agree to "non-aggression".' And they, the Americans, did then accept non-aggression; but that will give you an idea how the situation has changed between then and now ... A few months ago I asked a former colleague from the State Department whether her government would ever conclude a non-aggression pact again. How she laughed! What a joke! Ridiculous! So, those were different times. Then they found that it had worked! Well, Kissinger told me a year later that never before had he seen a government first say what it wants, then do it and then find it actually works! That led to the development of very close relations between Bonn and Washington, closer than they have ever been since. And we established a back channel. He told me that he had a back channel to Moscow.

I only informed him later, because it did not yet exist when I was over there in October 1969, that we too had set up a back channel with Moscow, i.e. an official but secret link. And I am quite certain it still exists today, at least between certain capitals, because it is an immensely useful way of building up trust. You can use a back channel of that kind to say openly, without loss of prestige, what you can do, what you cannot and what you would like. And nobody can use it as a means or as a reason for deceiving the other side; you could only do that once, after all, and then never again. That is to say, Schmidt kept up Brandt's back channel and, when Kohl became Chancellor, I offered him this back channel and after a moment's thought he said 'Yes, I will go along with that. After all, you never know what might happen.' That meant that this direct contact between Bonn and Moscow was maintained.

As for Paris and London, there was a tangible sense of mistrust, of unease, although slightly different in that they could say to themselves 'After all, nothing serious can actually come out of it; the Americans would put a stop to that.' I do not know whether anybody really thought of Rapallo, because that was a completely different situation and it would have been ridiculous. And both Paris and London supported the provision of humanitarian relief, such as further exchanges of visits and increased visits in both directions, more from East to West than from West to East but in fact both ways.

The situation in Paris was a little, shall we say, conflicting, to put it mildly. On the one hand France was, after all, committed to German reunification. On the other hand, both Pompidou and Mitterrand asked 'Do you really want to see German reunification?' Well of course, what else? De Gaulle had spoken of a Europe of fatherlands. So? The Federal Republic was not the fatherland of the Germans, after all! That is to say it was, if you like, a natural right to restore unity to the country. And even if they were supportive in principle and seemed to know what was going on, it was probably very hard for the French to understand the relations between these two enemy brothers. In fact at a somewhat later stage, when things went downhill between Washington and Moscow and the Cold War started up again, the two enemy brothers had an equal interest in not becoming a nuclear battlefield.