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Brandt's Visit to the GDR (March 23, 1970)

The Erfurt meeting between Chancellor Willy Brandt and Willy Stoph, Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the GDR, marked the start of direct negotiations between the two German governments. According to the author of this article, these talks entailed both opportunities and risks for the SED regime.

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### Where We Would Be

From the moment the West German head of government stepped onto the red carpet in Erfurt, at the very latest, the GDR was no longer anything special – no phenomenon, no zone, but instead just a country like all others. There came someone who did not use quotation marks and who, through his mere presence, offered reverence to the GDR. His respect of the protocol, flags, hymns, and soldiers was a sign of acknowledgement.

So it was indeed an “hour of truth,” as chief SED commentator Karl Eduard von Schnitzler said. An hour, certainly, in which the GDR regime, always assured of its own sovereignty, had this sovereignty authorized by its German neighbor. It was an hour in which the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, once the home paper of the proponents of Bonn's sole representation of Germany, discovered “two established, self-assured, normal countries” on German soil and wrote that it was “now irretrievably lost: the unity of state in the forms we are familiar with.”

Really: Never before in the two decades of German discord had the GDR come so close to achieving its goal of being fully recognized by Bonn, and thus being accepted internationally. But also never before – and to this extent as well Erfurt might have been an hour of truth – was this country so directly confronted with the problem of how to avoid the risks that seem inevitable when, in a world of change, the fronts between East and West start to move.

Not that the GDR would start to totter if its citizens start calling the other Willy to come to the window, as did happen in Erfurt. And not that the Soviet Union would lose its interest in the westernmost pillar of its empire and let it fall.

Instead, it is the imponderabilities that constitute the risk: such as the question to what extent – as détente grows stronger – the self-interests of the brother nations in the socialist bloc could collide with the interests of the GDR; or the question to what extent the step out of protective isolation that comes with contact to the Western world threatens to expose the GDR to undesirable foreign influences; and finally the question of how this development might influence not only the consciousness of the people in the GDR, but also the thinking of the SED

functionary corps.

Certainly not totally unaware of these – in the long term irrefutable – dangers, the GDR leadership was focused on one main goal that day in Erfurt and afterwards: full recognition of the GDR under international law by the Federal Republic, and thus the contractual safeguarding of the existing situation (the status quo) in Germany and Europe.

GDR minister president Willi Stoph on the evening after the meeting with Willy Brandt: “There is no way to take a detour around establishing normal, equal relations between our two countries on the basis of international law and around recognizing the European borders and the outcome of the Second World War.”

Walter Ulbricht, chairman of the GDR Council of State and head of the SED, on the following day in the Thuringian city of Suhl, said: “This is why the people of the German Democratic Republic urgently, and with total justification, demand of its state leadership that agreements on partial aspects of the normalization be assured by means of an internationally valid treaty of basic principles on equal, nondiscriminatory relations.”

Not until such a treaty is concluded, according to Ulbricht, “will we without a doubt be willing to engage in discussion on some partial issues and find agreement with regard to many concerns.” It remains open, however, whether he interprets that the same way that Bonn would like to have it understood (ranging from humanitarian travel relief to a pan-German soccer tournament) or possibly raises the demand that Bonn would have to pay 100 billion marks compensation for refugee migration in the years before the Wall was built.

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Source: “Wo wären wir” [“Where We Would Be”], *Der Spiegel*, March 23, 1970, pp. 29-32.

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