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Abstract

The Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) has a history that is as turbulent as that of the country itself. From persecution during the rule of the Kaiser and the Fuhrer to its current status as one of the two premier parties in the Reichstag, its story is wrapped up in the conflict between seeking change through reform and through revolution. In order to study this tension, I examined the lives of Karl Liebknecht and Willy Brandt. The lives of Liebknecht, the disillusioned Social Democrat who helped found the German Communist Party following World War I, and Brandt, the first SPD chancellor following World War II, illustrate the challenges, failures, and successes of the SPD and help explain how and why the SPD was radically transformed during the early Cold War.

Two Berlins, Two Social Democrats

On May 1, 1916, a crowd of approximately 10,000 Berlin workers gathered to hear the words of the popular German Social Democratic (SPD) leader Karl Liebknecht (Trotsky, 1984). They heard words condemning the existing Prussian government—the government which would continue to place “great burdens” on its people by using the media to propagandize the public with a “touching delicacy of patriotic sentiment” (as cited in Zimand, 1918, para. 7). During the speech, Liebknecht railed against the militaristic Prussian society and hoped that the people of Berlin would realize their true power and take hold of their society. Sadly, its main effect was to fulfill the prophecy of the speaker; the man who claimed that Germans had “the unquestionable right to hold [their] tongue between [their] teeth” would be forced to do so following his arrest and subsequent conviction of high treason (as cited in Zimand, para. 8). His last words on that May Day—the demand that the people rise with one voice so as to “have peace now!”—would not be realized until another Social Democrat came to power in the 1960s (as cited in Zimand, para. 14).

Skimming ahead in the pages of history to 1956, one again finds a visionary Social Democrat speaking to masses of Berliners. After the Soviets had decided to exercise their power by killing 8,000 rebellious residents of Budapest, the residents of West Berlin were ready to storm the East (and thus deepen the Cold War freeze).

Conservative leaders in West Berlin were unable to stem the rising emotional tide of the people—people who wanted all of Germany to be free of undue Soviet influence. Peace was only maintained on the night of November 5, 1956, through Willy Brandt's appeal to the patriotic heart of the potentially riotous mobs and his decision to lead them in the "Good Comrade" song (Binder, 1975, p. 154). Had violence ensued, one can only imagine how the Soviet fist on East Germany would have clenched ever-tighter. As Brandt's career unfolded, as he became mayor of Cold War Berlin, leader of the SPD, and German chancellor, he would continually display great strength and confidence. He, like Liebknecht before him, longed for peace, but he realized that peace could be achieved through neither weakness nor impulsive mob actions.

It is doubtful one could imagine a nation that witnessed more turbulence than Germany did over the last century and a half. Finally unifying nearly a millennia after England and France had begun the process and attempting to industrialize at the same time, Germany showed remarkable national progress under Bismarck (even showing the beginnings of a social welfare state, albeit created by conservatives and with the intention of maintaining the status quo). Such progress was undone by defeat in two world wars and at the peace tables of Versailles. Even attempting to cope with and make recompense for one of the greatest crimes of all time, the Holocaust, was not enough when it came to handicapping the once-proud nation; Germany was instead further divided by the adversarial allies. If one had a wish for 21st-century Germany, it would be the wish of Brandt and Liebknecht: peace. Nonetheless, crises tend to create heroes just as they create villains. The Cold War world would bring Brandt to prominence; the icy relations between East and West Germany would allow him to transform the SPD. After the party was persecuted by Bismarck and labeled a failure for its efforts during the Weimar experiment, it would not be until Brandt's leadership in the 1960s that the SPD would decisively take power and reestablish its visionary direction. This essay will analyze the dramatic changes in the SPD through the light of the experiences and characters, successes and failures of Liebknecht and Brandt. Both were men of action and of a very human ethic; when their surroundings changed in radical manners (i.e., German involvement in World War I or Hitler's coming to power), they responded as men of action who would betray theory in order to save persons.

Historiography

The material in this essay came largely from two biographies. Helmut Trotnow's work on Liebknecht titled *Karl Liebknecht (1871–1919): Political Biography* and David Binder's biography of Brandt, *The Other German*, provide the basis for the comparison of the men. Trotnow's piece takes a fresh and more "intelligible" look at Liebknecht than do the works of many of his peers by considering his actions through the light of his commitment to "socialism as an emancipation movement" and the "enlightenment of the workers" (Morgan, 1986, p. 419). Other approaches to Liebknecht's life struggle to create meaning from his often-radical and at times contradictory actions; Karl Meyer's *Karl Liebknecht: Man Without a Country*, for example, leaves the reader with the impression of a man of high morals who was incapable of leading a large-scale movement and never taken seriously by his peers (Snell, 1957). Binder, an American journalist, seems to have written a

biography meriting more consideration of Brandt than the sensationalist Viola Drath's *Willy Brandt: Prisoner of His Past* or Terence Prittie's rather superficial *Willy Brandt: Portrait of a Statesman*. In response to Foster's 1976 critique that the "definitive biography" on Brandt still needed to be written, Peter Merseburger and others have introduced new biographies of Brandt in recent years (Foster, 1976, p. 322).

In order to more fully understand the times and socialist milieu in which Liebknecht and Brandt operated, a third character also merits particular study. Eduard Bernstein, and the revisionist socialism which he represented in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, must have influenced both men. Like Liebknecht, he knew Marx and Engels personally, albeit as much more of a peer than the younger Liebknecht could have claimed. However, before Liebknecht became such, Bernstein was an ideal representative of the unorthodox Marxist. In his "advocacy of universal suffrage" and belief in "the independence of ethical systems from economic conditions," we certainly see a man similar to the subjects of this essay (Morris, p. 141). As he observed the 1890s German economy developing in ways which contradicted Marx's predictions, he became bolder in offering his own evolutionary version of socialism, a version in which real change could be effected through gradual reform. He would even go on to define socialism as "a movement towards—or the state of—an order of society based on the principle of association" (as cited in Morris, p. 145). Similar sentiments reign in *Evolutionary Socialism*, in which Bernstein claimed that "social democracy cannot further this work better than by taking its stand unreservedly on the theory of democracy—on the ground of universal suffrage with all the consequences resulting therefrom to its tactics" and that "the security of civil freedom has always seemed to it to stand higher than the fulfillment of some economic progress" (Bernstein, 1899, chap. 3). Brandt and Liebknecht thus emerge as important figures in the story of revisionist socialism in Germany.

It may be in the light of Bernstein's claim that socialism is a "movement towards...an order of society based on the principle of association," that we most truly see Liebknecht and Brandt (1899, chap. 3). As has been alluded to, neither were completely orthodox socialists or Marxists. Rather, each saw in socialism a movement which sought the betterment of their fellow people, and especially of the oft-mistreated working class. This is why their beliefs and the company they kept changed as often as the world turned; their beliefs and actions were reactions against threats to their most vulnerable neighbors. One does not need to believe Liebknecht was a committed Marxist when he helped found the German Communist Party; instead, he was out of patience with the measures taken by the SPD during World War I. And Brandt's turn from revolutionary young man to reformist leader was not a betrayal of early Marxist principles; it was an acknowledgement of his solidarity with Germany and its people. While claiming that both fit neatly into the reformist role may be a stretch, it should be clear that neither felt compelled to always base actions in socialist doctrine.

Two Men, One Beginning

No environmental psychologist would be surprised that Liebknecht became an SPD member. His father, Wilhelm Liebknecht, was a founder of the SPD and a dissenting voice when it came to German aggression against the French during the Franco-Prussian War (Trotsky, 1984). (In fact, young Karl's home life was so

dominated by socialist thought that Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels were asked to be his godparents.) Throughout his life, the Liebknecht surname would prove both an asset and a liability to Karl and his children. The Reich, never an advocate for pluralism or diverse viewpoints, had a tendency to create problems for dissidents. The surname would also prove to be at times a hindrance within the SPD itself; despite his father's continual urging to hire Karl, party leaders feared charges of patronage and corruption and would not bring him on as a party lawyer. As will be touched on later, this decision would actually allow him to develop his own philosophy as a lawyer, politician, and revolutionary.

Brandt's history also inclined him to be a Social Democrat. And, incidentally, his name was also targeted by powerful Germans. He was named Herbert Frahm by his parents, and he later adopted the name "Willy Brandt" in order to escape Nazi persecution. Political opponents would eventually attempt to delegitimize Brandt as a candidate by sarcastically referring to him as "Herr Frahm" (Binder, 1975, p. 189). Family also determined Brandt's political ties; his activist grandfather's return from the Great War ensured Brandt would join the SPD. And while it may seem unnecessary to relate an anecdote from Brandt's childhood, the fact that Brandt often told it himself proves its merit. When his grandfather was on strike, the young man once received a seemingly providential gift of bread from a kindly gentleman. Proud to bring his bounty home, one can only imagine the shock experienced when his grandfather ordered him to return the gift to the man quickly perceived to be the enemy, the employer. This lesson in both pride and politics was one which would never be forgotten and which would inspire Brandt's politics throughout his days.

While each person's SPD membership early in life was largely a birthright, each would also be forced to decide in a time of crisis whether or not to renounce the early loyalty. In the words of Trotnow, who was describing the situation faced by the SPD and Liebknecht in 1914, one "either had to be prepared to defend one's national boundaries regardless of that country's domestic politics, or one opposed the idea of suddenly defending a state which one had previously opposed" (1984, p. 175). Brandt, unhappy with the seeming lack of urgency in the SPD's battle against Hitler, was faced with a similar dilemma. For both men, a world war was the crisis that led to them to take seemingly more radical positions.

Liebknecht and World War I

Before turning to Liebknecht's dramatic experiences during World War I, it is necessary to understand the man and the causes he championed before 1914. Otherwise, it is easy to claim that the man who was murdered by the Ebert-led government had been radicalized, that his conversion to communism and his revolutionary founding of the ill-fated Free Socialist Republic of Germany was not the desperate act of a man who had tried everything else but the actual ideological position of an extreme leftist. However, as Trotnow claimed (in a conclusion which departs from that of most Marxist historians), Liebknecht's refusal to "bow to party discipline" meant less that he had become more radical than that he was "levelheaded" in a time when others were swept up in a nationalistic fervor (1984, pp. 153–154). This investigation of Liebknecht will concern itself with Liebknecht's views as a socialist and his denunciation of the militarism that was central to German power relations. Two

other battles that were near to Liebknecht's heart—the fight for the rights of Russian émigrés and the battle for a more fair voting system in Prussia—will be treated later.

Given Liebknecht's proximity to the authors of *Capital* and the *Communist Manifesto*, it may be surprising that he was not a Marxist from his youth. However, it is clear from Liebknecht's writings and actions that he did not subscribe to Marx's dialectical understanding of history; he instead believed that society and class relations could be made fairer through reform just as well as through revolution (Trotsky, 1984). In fact, in Trotsky's words, the "roots of [Liebknecht's] ideas are to be found less in the world of socialist theory than in the tradition of 19th-century German idealism: for the cofounder of the KPD [German Communist Party] was a humanist, Enlightenment figure who wanted to help humanity rise to a higher level through the emancipation of the proletariat" (p. 10). This idea of raising the people's power and quality of life guided Liebknecht throughout his life. Further, he did not see his role as that of leading the masses in revolt; rather, it was his job to ready the people to "do battle" for themselves (p. 53). Sadly, his consistent misjudgment of the people's readiness would lead to both his imprisonment and murder. The man who only wanted to "create for the poorest and most miserable...an existence worthy of human being" would die when the dream must have seemed farther away than ever (p. 50).

The clearest manifestation of Liebknecht's attempts to enlighten the German populace came in his attempt to inform them of the degree that they were merely pawns of a militaristic state. The speech he made on May 1, 1916, which resulted in his imprisonment for 2 years as a traitor, was but the final blow in a struggle he had been waging since 1904 (Trotsky, 1984). In fact, between 1904 and 1907 he made numerous motions at SPD conferences asking the party to propagandize against militarism. When his pleas went unheard, he conducted a private campaign. The campaign was executed within the law and consisted of distributing pamphlets and speaking outside in areas allowed by the law. After 3 years of educating the young men of the proletariat so that "the state power will no longer feel as confident as it does today that the army which obeys it blindly could be used for unlawful acts," the Prussian government decided to try Liebknecht for high treason—the first of his two trials for the offense (p. 56). The show trial resulted in his conviction and imprisonment; however, it also resulted in his election to the Reichstag and his status as second "most popular man" in the party (as cited in Trotsky, p. 71). The fight against militarism, in that it consisted of informing and educating the populace about the manner in which they were being manipulated, is the preeminent example of how Liebknecht's politics met his practice.

Having thus seen Liebknecht's stance on an issue of utmost importance, his actions during World War I should not prove surprising. When his party decided to ally itself with the government and vote for war credits (the means by which the Reichstag approved funding for the war effort), Liebknecht faced the choice of either voting against his party or against everything for which he had fought. (It should be noted that, before casting the lone dissenting Reichstag vote on December 2, 1914, he had voted with the party faction in favor of the credits on August 4 [Trotsky, 1984].) It becomes clear that Liebknecht, who had been willing to fight against militarism on his own, could only say 'this far and no further' when it came to the party actively supporting the hierarchical and militaristic Prussian state that had helped create World War I. The words of Brandt, spoken a half-century later, articulate what Liebknecht must have

been thinking: "Peace has never been saved by weakness. There is a point where you have to recognize that you cannot retreat one step. This point has been reached" (as cited in Binder, 1975, p. 187). While by no means a Marxist, Liebknecht was a strict believer in the international nature of the proletariat. The war (and the armaments industries that were profiting from it) was the most despicable manifestation the class-based system had yet created. Because he could not convince his party to vote against the war budget, he moved away from his party and toward a group of individuals who would take actions against the state (i.e., Luxembourg and the Communists). It was not so much that he had been radicalized; the SPD had become diluted.

Brandt, the Third Reich, and World War II

Brandt also faced a time of great crisis during his formative years. Of course, the crisis that confronted Brandt was largely a result of Liebknecht's failures. Had Liebknecht convinced the SPD to vote against the war credits, the allies may not have imposed such harsh penalties at Versailles and the experiment in hyperdemocracy which was Weimar may have been more stable. The seeming unanimity of the Reichstag in supporting the German war effort (and thus in turn the German people) allowed the allies to declare all Germany guilty and to increase the burden on the defeated nation. Had Liebknecht succeeded, or the SPD remained resolute in opposition to the war effort, Hitler may never have had a populace hungering for the pride and leadership that he provided. Such thoughts are merely conjecture and do little to serve those who were forced to confront the SPD's previous failures. As Brandt became disillusioned with the parliamentary and seemingly ineffective manner in which the SPD was combating Hitler, his politics shifted to the left. After the left-leaning Young Socialist movement was forced to disband by the establishment, Brandt quickly moved into the Socialist Workers Party (SAP), an SPD splinter group, in 1931 (Binder, 1975). Joining the SAP meant that he was moving away from the reformist measures endorsed by the SPD toward the "revolutionary measures" he believed the crisis in German government merited (p. 30). He would even move toward Communism following the Nazis' electoral gains in 1932 for its militancy if nothing else. The early stages of the exile in Norway, in which he was acting as an SAP activist, saw him claiming to be a "Communist in the sense of the *Manifesto* of Marx and Engels" (as cited in Binder, p. 52). Brandt thus also exemplified the "long experienced tension between...reformist and revolutionary" in the SPD; a confrontation which would only be resolved under his leadership in the postwar period (Fulbrook, 1992, p. 23). This was exactly the same tension Liebknecht faced; that Brandt was lucky enough to live through his crisis may explain why he came back to the party and was ultimately able to transform it.

Of course, postwar Brandt would be known for the manner in which he moved the SPD to the center of the political spectrum, the manner in which he valued politics of action more than theoretical ideologies. Was he a different man than the one we have just glanced at? One must answer this in the negative, instead concluding that it was the times that changed just as it was the situation that led Liebknecht to the left. Fighting Hitler demanded extra-legislative actions and alliances with those who valued actions outside the marginalized Reichstag. While it is clear to see from his experience in fighting Hitler why he would value practical actions and the need for democrats to fight for their state just as fascists and communists were willing to fight for theirs, Brandt's

sojourn in the far left would influence him in another manner. Throughout his career, even as he was leading his party toward the center and participation in government, Brandt was criticized for his leniency with the young and leftists.

As a socialist, Brandt was remarkably similar to Liebknecht. Doctrine and orthodoxy seemed to matter much less to either man than achieving something that would help their people. Just as Liebknecht had found the enlightenment and emancipation of the proletariat to be the greatest need in his time, Brandt sought a “united Europe” and a Germany that would exercise “the right of the nation to self-determination” (as cited in Binder, 1975, pp. 89, 93). In fact, in running for mayor of Berlin he portrayed himself as a “moderate reformer” and disallowed all campaigning that “smacked of socialization slogans or of Marxist class struggle” (p. 113). By 1948, the man who had once claimed to be a disciple of Marx now claimed that one could not “be a democrat today without being anti-Communist” (p. 132). That Liebknecht decided during World War I that being a democrat required being a communist should not dissuade one from accepting the parallels between the men; rather, each man continually adapted his politics so that he would be in the best position to fight the people’s greatest enemy, be they Prussian militarists, Nazis, or Soviets.

When considering the degree to which the Communist Liebknecht was a democrat, one needs only to examine his commitment to altering the Prussian voting system. (The three-class voting system, which allotted one-third of representation to the richest, another third to a “moderately wealthy,” and a final third to the large majority of the Prussian people, ensured that Prussian democracy would be at most a façade [Fulbrook, 1992, p. 20]. It would last until the formation of the Weimar Republic.) And while his statement that “it’s complete nonsense to think that we will ever overthrow the three-class suffrage with the aid of the three-class suffrage” might not seem that of a democrat, it is necessary to remember that democracies seldom come into being democratically (as cited in Binder, 1975, p. 87). Sadly, the SPD was not entirely receptive to his ideas; it was “cool towards the suffrage movement from the beginning, for it was afraid that the mass demonstrations would provoke clashes with the state apparatus” (Trotsky, 1984, p. 96). It would not be until Brandt’s tenure as leader of the party that a more lively internal democracy would be encouraged, and it was the new dynamism that allowed the SPD to become a meaningful party.

To the East

Being “good” socialists in spirit, if not doctrine, both Liebknecht and Brandt realized that their enemies did not lay in the people of a foreign state but in the governments that profited from their subjugation. And, while Bismarck and the Kaisers may have seen in France and the rest of western Europe the future for Germany, these German socialists realized that they could not act as if the Russian bear was hibernating. For Liebknecht, the belief in the international nature of the proletariat drove him toward Russia. Whether it was protesting the Tsar’s visits to Germany or defending Russian émigrés in hopeless show trials, he was the most prominent of the SPD members in advocating for the politically oppressed of his socialist brethren. In fact, he believed that Germans needed to orient themselves toward Russia not only because of the “inhumanity and injustice” of the autocratic system but because “if reaction did not rule in Russia, then the three-class suffrage in Prussia would not

last for another day” (as cited in Trotnow, 1984, p. 101). While Brandt was much more open than Liebknecht when it came to dealing with the Soviet leadership and the tyrannical Soviet rulers of his day were the result of a Communist revolution Liebknecht approved of, the orientation of both to the East proves striking.

The Soviet Union was so important to Brandt that his policy toward it was given a name, *Ostpolitik*. The “Eastern Policy,” or “change through rapprochement” as top aid Bahr termed it, must stand as the hallmark of Brandt’s achievements in politics (Bahr, 1963, p. 1). *Ostpolitik* was not a policy formed to win an election or to create a legacy; it did not come into being when Brandt claimed in 1969 that his government would “not be a comfortable government” for the allies and would seek friendlier relations with the Soviet Bloc (Binder, 1975, p. 256). Instead, *Ostpolitik*’s roots lay in Brandt’s experiences in Berlin and as mayor of the contested city. It stemmed specifically from his vision of a united Germany, his promise that “the abandonment of our countrymen will not take place” (as cited in Binder, p. 188). Brandt would never concede that the relations between the German Democratic and Federal Republics should be on the international scale reserved for sovereign states; rather, he believed that there existed a special relationship between the German governments. Further, he believed that both governments had the responsibility to “imbue the people with a boundless will to win the struggle for the reunification of Germany” (as cited in Binder, p. 147). However, realizing that reunification was unlikely to happen during his tenure either as mayor or chancellor, Brandt sought realistic improvements in relations with Eastern governments and easier lives for all German people. Each manifestation of *Ostpolitik* deserves treatment.

One must never believe that Brandt’s reaching out to the East was a gesture of weakness. Rather, having seen how the left had utterly failed to stop Hitler, he worked hard to ensure that the SPD would take a more militaristic stance in the “problem of the relationship between democratic order and armed power” (as cited in Binder, 1975, p. 151). He maintained the confidence of West Berliners during the “Second Berlin Crisis” of 1958, when Moscow issued notes that many interpreted as notification of a possible movement on the city (p. 163). And after the Berlin Wall was built, his inner drive and political skills shone. He pushed for small gains for the people, like the right of East German pensioners to visit their relations in the West, claiming:

To hell with politics if it isn’t there to make life easier for people instead of making it harder for them. And what is good for the people in the divided country is good, too, for the nation.... You might say that these are all just little steps. I reply: I’d like big ones more, but small steps are better than no steps. (as cited in Binder, p. 206)

One doubts that a more succinct or meaningful definition of the policy of *Ostpolitik* exists, or one which more accurately reflects Brandt’s personality. As foreign minister and chancellor, he continued to work toward rapprochement, seeking “Easter visiting privileges for West Berliners in East Berlin,” free access to Berlin for Westerners, and telephone lines that crossed the Berlin Wall (pp. 245, 281). Brandt would always be seen as “moving toward the other part of Germany and not away from it” (p. 256). While Liebknecht protested the Tsar’s presence on German soil, the man who often used Reichstag “question time” to embarrass the government would likely have favored engaging in dialogue and debate with the Soviets (Trotnow, 1984, p. 159).

The SPD: A Party Transformed

Having examined and compared the lives of Liebknecht and Brandt, the reader is still due an explanation for the fundamental changes that Brandt's achievements led to in both the SPD and Germany. And it is certainly not overstating the case to say that Brandt did succeed in many ways; this winner of the Nobel Peace Prize brought West Berlin through an extremely turbulent time and guided the SPD to its first chancellorship since the Weimar years. While Liebknecht had never been able to lead a party strong enough to grant Bismarck's and his descendants' tongue-in-cheek wish to "sit down for once on the benches of the opposition," Brandt would be able to say just that to the Christian Democratic Union of Germany/Christian Social Union of Bavaria coalition (CDU/CSU), which had led the Federal Republic during the postwar period (as cited in Dahrendorf, 1967, p. 59). While the socialism which Wilhelm Liebknecht desired was long gone from the party platform, so was the Kaiser. The SPD had been transformed from a political nuisance to the face of government itself. And, just as the German Basic Law represented a "new constitutionalism" in response to the experiment in democracy known as Weimar and the horrors of the Third Reich, Brandt came to serve as a new (or "other," as biographer Binder often referred to him) representative of the German people and its largest socialist party (Kommers, 2000, p. 1).

When Brandt returned to Berlin politics, his focus was on making life better for the people of the city and ensuring that the free Berliners were not forgotten by the West. It was not the SPD party program that dictated his actions so much as his desire that the people of Berlin not be sacrificed to the Communist behemoth, a desire that led to seemingly small gains like passes for West Germans to cross into East Berlin to visit relatives during Christmas of 1964 (Kommers, 2000). However, the most important reflections of his belief in practical politics can be seen in his transformation of the SPD at the party convention at Bad Godesberg. Binder, perhaps, put it best when he claimed that under Brandt's leadership the SPD "was abandoning nearly a century of commitment to being exclusively a 'workers' party' in exchange for a broader appeal as a 'people's party'" (1975, p. 170). This transformation, in conjunction with the willingness of the Brandt-led SPD to join into coalition with the CDU/CSU in 1966, represents the degree to which he valued change and progress over theory.

Even more than this, though, Brandt's philosophy and actions were both a reflection of how programmatic differences had weakened democratic Germans' resistance to Hitler and of his experiences with how socialist parties in Norway accomplished change. Interestingly, the moment that most doomed cooperation among Germans resisting Hitler was the murder of Liebknecht (and Rosa Luxembourg); during the Weimar years, the SPD and KPD would never join against their common enemy. These influences led Brandt to claim that "we want to take over the political leadership of the state with the unconsumed energy over which this wing of German politics disposes, and we will take over" (as cited in Binder, 1975, p. 171). He most succinctly stated his philosophy following his resignation from the chancellorship, proposing that "he who gives up the center sacrifices his ability to govern," his was a confidence and mentality which the SPD had long needed (p. 170).

If one wants to study the transformation of the SPD or to understand why Brandt was able to drive the SPD into governing coalitions starting in 1966 and the

chancellorship in 1969, the aforementioned party conference at Bad Godesburg must be examined. Held in November 1959, it was here that the SPD “wheeled on its axis” (Binder, 1975, p. 170). While it has been noted that what occurred was essentially a broadening of the demographic the party sought to appeal to and a dilution of the socialist doctrine, it was much more. And while one can imagine that Liebknecht may have embraced the spirit of the appeal, the party certainly became something he would not have recognized. Not only was Marx completely dropped from the program, but the SPD finally decided to embrace the idea of a strong defensive military (p. 171). Brandt, who Binder calls the “practical father of the Godesburg program,” most clearly stated the new spirit of the party in his first speech: “There is no hopeless situation. Hitler didn’t have to come to power, the split of Germany does not have to become petrified, and the Federal Republic doesn’t have to be suffused with a perverted Kaiser Wilhelm mentality” (as cited in Binder, p. 171). The reform-revolution tension within the SPD that Liebknecht and Brandt had persistently been confronted with was now settled; the SPD would effect change through governmental power and pressure. The party, which Brandt would head even into the 1980s, has stayed the course and shows no signs of departing from his legacy.

Political Geography

To end this commentary about Brandt, Liebknecht, and the party that dominated their lives, a geographic analogy may prove appropriate. Calling to mind the famous words of John Donne (1624) that “no man is an Island entire of itself” for “every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main,” Liebknecht and Brandt come quickly to mind. Few lives, paradoxically, both confirm and contradict the statement in such a dramatic fashion. While no person develops in a vacuum, Liebknecht’s and Brandt’s tumultuous times certainly limited the options these driven and conscientious men had. However, each was also an island at some point of their careers when it came to the mainland that was the SPD. Naturally, their isolation occurred during times of great crisis for themselves, their party, and the world. That Liebknecht died as a Communist and revolutionary meant that he would never have the chance to see the mainland again; Brandt’s longer lifespan allowed him and the party to meet in the middle.

A last coincidence bears retelling. The theory of continental drift was first fully developed by a German scientist during World War I, but it would not be until the theory of plate tectonics was developed in the 1960s that continental drift became plausible. Similarly, while Liebknecht offered an alternative for the SPD during World War I, it would not be until Brandt’s time and leadership that the party learned how to radically shift its position.

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