

September 16, 1991
**From the Interview by the Honorary Chairman of the
SPD, Brandt, with Die Welt**

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Summary:

Willy Brandt's interview with Die Welt on unified Germany and the break-up of the Soviet Union.

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”Politically Europe is still terribly far behind”

WELT: In reunited Germany, has what belongs together already grown together?

Brandt: That would be too much to expect. Political unity has been achieved more quickly than anyone had assumed in late 1989. Even the European, Atlantic and international classification of united Germany was regulated more quickly than most – I included – had considered possible. Almost everything else is in a state of flux.

WELT: When will the country’s economic division be overcome?

Brandt: Economic coalescence and the synchronisation of social systems will take a number of years, perhaps even longer than the four, five years which I once foresaw. However, that can be done in the nineties.

WELT: And when will the wall in the heads of the people fall?

Brandt: Unmistakably, a certain alienation toward one’s own people has emerged on both sides – not only in the East vis-à-vis the former Federal Republic; there are also many reservations by Germans in the former Federal Republic vis-à-vis their fellow countrymen in the new states. That will eventually be dispelled through active contacts and exchanges.

WELT: Is there a lack of willingness in the West to share with those in the East?

Brandt: I do not agree with people's occasional cursing addressed at West Germans. But they were not sufficiently challenged at the right point in time. Because this is so, one cannot maintain that they were not willing to make more of an effort.

WELT: Deficits in information, false promises?

Brandt: Yes and no. The social and economic burdens of the unification process are being borne nevertheless. No one likes to pay taxes, but the citizens are paying them. The large amounts for the East are the expressions of a grandiose reallocation; sometime in the nineties they will prove to have been a good investment.

[...]²

WELT: Have the people in the new states become different Germans because of the GDR's regime of injustice?

Brandt: Of course not. Apart from the question of systems: In some respects, even those who intellectually had nothing to do with the regime during the SED era, still had to – or wanted to – get used to the fact that to get along they had to get their signals from above and focus strongly on what was required of them. Thank heaven, things operated differently for us; it will also turn out differently with these people; most certainly they will find their way to more self-assuredness.

WELT: For all practical purposes, the Soviet Union no longer exists.³ Is the giant, crumbling empire still predictable?

Brandt: I think that in a relatively short time we will be able to confirm this; we do not have absolute certainty. But everything points

to the likelihood that we will be dealing with a new entity, a new kind of union with an unambiguous emphasis on Russia.

WELT: Didn't the Russians always play the main role in the USSR?

Brandt: Indeed, this role is not so new for the Russians. But we in the West of Europe, and particularly we Germans, will do well not to lose sight of the fact that Russia is a major country and remains so – and is either actually or potentially a major power. But, it is becoming apparent that it will not be Russia alone. And even if the union were to consist only of Russia, the Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan, this would still be more than 80 per cent of the previous Soviet Union.

WELT: Do you anticipate that a future union will remain limited to these four republics?

Brandt: It could well become more in this new, decentralised, but economically and militarily cohesive form.

WELT: Does the thought of the Soviet nuclear weapons potential and present control of it give you sleepless nights?

Brandt: Such thoughts are not exactly conducive to a night's rest. I ask myself: What will become of the especially dangerous weapons in such a state of upheaval? I am curious to know what happened in the most critical days⁴ with the codes for the nuclear weapons. To play with nuclear weapons at this stage would have made no sense. Nevertheless, it is encouraging that the leading persons in Russia recognised immediately that this is a critical issue in the restructuring of a nation.

WELT: Do you trust the reassurance that the strategic nuclear weapons are on Russian soil and under control?

Brandt: Yes. The nuclear weapons were predominantly – but not entirely – on Russian territory. What becomes of the other stuff which still exists, after all, is important too.

WELT: What other stuff?

Brandt: Things become dangerous if governmental organisation becomes completely chaotic and fissionable material or nuclear weapons or parts of them are sold to anyone who would like to have them. After all, there is a series of borders and cross-border connections. If we keep this in mind, we can become quite ill at ease.

WELT: To date there are only initial outlines of the new power structures. Will the dialogue on disarmament continue?

Brandt: I see a lot of willingness among those who have something to say about it to continue the negotiations on arms limitations with the NATO countries, and therefore with Western Europe as with America. Because the people in Moscow itself need the restructuring, they will be willing to save on arms. That could mean a shifting of military expenditures to civilian areas – and be something like a peace dividend. Of course, the destruction of weapons also costs money, but only once and at manageable costs. And then, it would have a calming effect if a lot of this stuff no longer existed.

WELT: Did Gorbachev lose political clout because of the coup; is Boris Yeltzin the new Tsarevitch?⁵

Brandt: I have not been to Moscow since that critical week, but I have had a number of contacts. A lot is changing there very quickly. During the critical week, I spoke by telephone with Alexander Yakovlev; at the time he had, as had his friend Shevardnadze, distanced himself a good bit from Gorbachev. Both resigned from the Communist Party to pre-empt being expelled; both were deeply disappointed by Gorbachev, who, they felt, was too hesitant. And a

few weeks later, Yakovlev turns up again at the Chancellery of the Federal Republic of Germany as an adviser to President Gorbachev. That is how quickly configurations can change there.

WELT: Are Gorbachev and Yeltzin the future success duo with a clearly defined division of roles?

Brandt: The two have achieved a relatively rapid cooperation which we could not have foreseen. Whether that holds and how long and who will become president of the new form of union – we will just have to see.

WELT: What chances for political survival do you give Gorbachev?

Brandt: Gorbachev's historical standing is beyond dispute. Since 1985, he has brought about considerable change, even though this kind of change in this form was by no means what he had worked or planned for; Gorbachev wanted to reform his system and make it acceptable for the people there and in other countries. Something quite different became of that: the end of the Communist system even in the Soviet Union after the end of Communism in the Soviet Union's satellite states.

WELT: Will Yeltzin, the strong man during the coup, occupy Gorbachev's seat?

Brandt: In the new construct which is forming, it already means something to be the first man among Russians. I would hazard a comparison: a chairman of the Metal Workers Union will not necessarily want to become chairman of the German Association of Trade Unions – the former function is important enough.

WELT: Is Communism finished worldwide?

Brandt: Historically, you are probably right. Nevertheless, we should be clear about one thing: There is still a gigantic power which is being governed in a Communist manner, at least as it is understood there, namely China. And there are still some medium-size Communist governed countries as well: North Korea, Vietnam and Cuba, even if one believes that Castro will not make it much longer. Historically, though, the collapse of the Communist system in the Soviet Union and in the Soviet Union's satellite states is already significant enough.

WELT: Is the top dog of Lenin's ideology dead after the events in the Soviet Union, or is the lead wolf now wearing a yellow coat?

Brandt: Earlier, when the Soviet Union was still intact, or seemed to be intact, there were groups and currents who considered themselves in better hands with Mao than with the Muscovites. Nowhere have I found that to be of extreme importance – in Europe, only when the Albanians bet on the Chinese horse; otherwise, not much has come of it. But it would already be significant enough if a pronounced influence on the Asiatic world emanated from China.

WELT: Aren't the possibilities for influence slight if anything?

Brandt: At present, I do not see that the Chinese are proselytising to any great degree. In fact, they are powerfully interested in the best possible cooperation with the most countries possible, independently of their internal makeup. That is a current summation; it does not always have to remain so. We will do well not to believe that all problems of Communist movements and national systems have already been dealt with now.

WELT: There is a civil war in Yugoslavia.⁶ Europeans are looking to the Balkans with concern. The EC purses its lips and threatens with sanctions and with recognising Slovenia and Croatia, but it is not

doing anything. Is the Community only a paper tiger, or is the much-touted crisis mechanism ineffective?

Brandt: I would not go that far. But it has certainly become very clear since the beginning of this year that the EC's foreign policy components still lag far, far behind what they have undertaken to accomplish. That could be clearly seen during the Gulf War, in light of the Yugoslavian tragedy and also during the crisis in Moscow.⁷ Indeed, it will still take a while for the predicted transition to a political union. One can surmise this from the example of Yugoslavia: the mechanism is still quite weak and operates clumsily; historical burdens get the upper hand - the atavisms of bloody conflicts dating back to and characterising the Second World War.

WELT: Should Germany single-handedly recognise Slovenia and Croatia, or must such a step be a concerted action of the EC?

Brandt: I think, but that is the nature of my experience, that one does not make threats with diplomatic recognition. There are, as otherwise in life, some things which you either do or leave as they are. In this matter, the real failure of the European Community was right before summer recess. Genscher was right with his position of not counting on the total dissolution of this federation [Yugoslavia] but rather on its reconstitution. At that time, there was no force behind it - and this criticism does not fall on the Germans alone, because, at the time, not only Croatia but also Slovenia were willing to enter into negotiations for a new confederation.

WELT: Would an early earnest threat to link sanctions in both political and economic areas really have had some effect?

Brandt: I am convinced of it. However, the trouble occurred at a time when the EC was still terribly far behind what it would have wished to be, and the CSCE, with institutions designed to be weak anyway, is not yet far enough along to be able to do anything at all. Coincidence

determined that the failure on both tracks became known at one and the same time. It is no coincidence that Poland's president, Lech Wałęsa, said that the United Nations needed to prepare itself to restrain conflicts. The Polish president is not the only one deeply disappointed with both European mechanisms.

WELT: Can you imagine a Europe without military components?

Brandt: No. But it does not hurt for one to calmly think awhile about their profiles. Everyone needs to know that political union does not exist without security policy. I, however, can not see any reason why we would have to change anything about NATO at present; it has already proved to be a stabilising factor through the very fact of its existence. We will have to take a very close look at what the EC can now bring into existence and what can become of the Helsinki process.⁸ Until that is clarified, NATO should remain untouched.

WELT: What is your stand on a European intervention force to put an end to the dying in Yugoslavia?

Brandt: That is an even more serious chapter than the matter of diplomatic recognition. It would not have been such a bad thing to have had something that we could have brought to the peace negotiations, which hopefully could have amounted to something – something which would have extended beyond the well-behaved EC observers who run around in Croatia with their white uniforms on and who are called ice cream vendors. Whenever we can no longer reach agreement in judging a political situation with respect to what we want – other than that we want to make peace –, it becomes a hollow question to ask what we would want to do with troops if we only had them.

WELT: What is now playing out in the multi-ethnic state of Yugoslavia, is that a foretaste of what could soon be happening in the disintegrating Soviet Union?

Brandt: When I think about the larger part of the Soviet Union, I hope not. But in some of the peripheral republics, we really need to prepare ourselves for some contingencies. For example, under the old regime it was impossible to ignore how difficult things were between Armenia and Azerbaijan⁹; things can start happening in other places as well. Something can rear its head there, something swept under the rug up to now, such as a regrettable and irrational form of excessive nationalism which, in many places could turn into racism. Surely, we are going to have to deal with such things for quite a while.

[...] ¹⁰

¹ Hans-Werner Loose asked the questions.

² In the following, Brandt expresses his opinions on the parties' prospects in the new federal states.

³ On 5 September 1991, the Congress of People's Deputies had decided to transform the Soviet Union into a federation of independent republics.

⁴ Meant here is the attempted coup by conservative elements of the CPSU against President Gorbachev on 18-21 August 1991.

⁵ Russian president Boris Yeltzin was the leader of the opposition which had brought about the collapse of the coup attempt against Gorbachev.

⁶ On 25 June 1991, Croatia and Slovenia had declared themselves independent. Immediately, the Serbian-dominated central government ordered a deployment of the military. Although no further military conflict took place with Slovenia since early July, the breakout of war with Croatia became all the more violent.

⁷ On the Gulf War, cf. the Introduction as well as Nos. 73, 74 and 76. On the crisis in Moscow, cf. Note 4.

⁸ Cf. No. 74, Note 6.

⁹ Cf. No. 43, Note 14–16.

¹⁰ North-South relations are the theme of the closing portion.