

The German Kissinger

A Tribute to Egon Bahr (1922-2015)

The praise which has been widely bestowed upon the achievements of Egon Bahr who recently died, mainly concern his merits as the architect of Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik*. Indeed, he was the man behind Brandt who since the early 60s advocated a new relationship of Germany with her Eastern neighbours, and in particular with the Soviet Union. As a man with strategic talents and the gift to shape policy by formulas, his presence at that time was fortuitous for Germany and indispensable for Brandt, as he had none of the archetypal politician's incessant desire to be in the public limelight.

Developing policies through back channels at the highest level is reminiscent of Henry Kissinger, who successfully applied the same method to obtain remarkable results. There is a further feature that Bahr and Kissinger have in common: they were taken aback by the social forces in Germany who in 1989 simply set the agenda of history. Both Kissinger and Bahr thought that the political system in the East would be sustained for a considerable number of years. Both preferred talking to Communist heads of state instead of fuelling revolt against the Communist system. Bahr went even so far to advise the transitional Minister of Defence of the DDR, Rainer Eppelmann. Apparently he expected that the DDR in one way or another could survive. That inclination towards status quo diplomacy which he shared with Kissinger, brought him into opposition with several Social Democrats who criticised his endless and unauthorized back-channel diplomacy with DDR officials. That critique came at a time when the fundamental confrontation with advocates of the German right wing parties who insinuated that he was „Moscow's agent“ was long over.

Kissinger's critical comments on Bahr in his memoirs are understandable. Bahr in terms of intelligence was equal to the legendary U.S. Secretary of State. Additionally Kissinger found fault with Bahr's patriotic commitment for Germany which he suspected to be a form of nationalism. Bahr was indeed what has become a rarity: a left wing patriot reluctant to make Germany a protectorate of any foreign powers.