

# The German SPD and the rising star of Bettino Craxi

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Several studies have been recently devoted to the foreign activities deployed by the West German political parties after the Second World War. Especially during the 1970s the SPD played a major role due to its prominent position in the European democratic socialism, to the widespread prestige enjoyed by its leaders and to the remarkable achievements of the SPD-led governments in internal and foreign policy. Although a consistent part of the SPD activities had been traditionally directed to the so-called “Third World countries” and to the populations living beyond the Iron Curtain, an increasing attention was paid during the 1970s to the developments occurring in Southern Europe. Spain, Portugal and Greece were contemporary involved in difficult transitions out of authoritarian regimes, which required a careful involvement of the democratic forces of Western Europe to avoid new Chilean-like authoritarian solutions and to lead the same countries toward a political, economic and social homogenisation on Western European standards. For its part, the SPD was interested in promoting the autonomous affirmation of the local social democratic parties, and to discourage their cooperation with other more radical forces of the left, such as the communists.

The strategy of a continental “social democratic autonomy” was challenged by the contemporary promotion of an alternative project by the leader of the French socialists François Mitterrand: a programmatic cooperation between socialist and communist forces in every country where the second represented a non-negligible part of the national political spectrum. Although the European character of the “frontist” proposal faded rapidly in the second half of the 1970s, it nonetheless occupied the political debate in international *fora*, and seemed to influence the developments inside some European countries.

Italy lied at the crossroad of these continental challenges, because of its geographic position and of the peculiarities of its political system. The opening in 1973 of the bureau of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (the party-linked foundation) in Rome, the first one in the Western world, prove the interest of the SPD for the “Italian case”. The permanent political, economic and social crisis of the country, coupled with the apparently irresistible electoral increase of the Italian Communist Party and the state of disarray of the Democrazia Cristiana (the party of relative majority), seemed to near the direct participation of the communists to the government, and to marginalize the social democratic forces. The realization of the “compromesso storico” (historic compromise) between the DC and the PCI could reverberate over the other south European countries, thus endangering the “autonomist” course that the SPD promoted as a continental platform, especially in view of the first popular elections for the European Parliament, scheduled for 1979. Furthermore, the Italian Communist Party was the leading force of “Eurocommunism”, a project aimed at legitimizing the Western communism as a fully democratic force autonomous from Moscow.

The main Western partners of Italy, included the government of Helmut Schmidt, did not hide their disfavour for the inclusion of the PCI in the Italian government. They even cooperate to limit its influence by narrowing the “room of manoeuvre” of the national government, especially in the field of economic policies and with the consent of a part of the Italian DC. Concerning the SPD, the main target of its activities was the Socialist Party, especially after the new young secretary Bettino Craxi had imposed an autonomist course to the party after its electoral all-time low in 1976. The German party, and especially Secretary Brandt, helped Craxi in his cultural struggle against the “communist hegemony” over the Italian Left and in his attempt to provide the Italian socialism with a “European profile” and with increased international contacts so as to overcome its traditional “inferiority complex” towards the PCI. Finally, the programs of the SPD for the future of Germany and of Europe proved to be a useful source of inspiration for the Italian party in its search for an autonomous profile. Therefore, the return to a DC-PSI coalition which definitively pushed the communists to the opposition at the beginning of the 1980s was undoubtedly welcomed in Bonn as a success of a broader cultural and political struggle for the socialist autonomy.