

ABSTRACT

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German Business Organizations and Trade Unions (1920s-1990s)

During the second half of the 20th century the relationship between German business organizations and trade unions was subject to major changes. The business organizations had to come to terms with stronger and more self-confident trade unions. Step by step they learned to work together as partners, thanks to a frame of mind and of institutions that came to be known as 'partnership of business and unions' or, in German, *Sozialpartnerschaft*. And the assumption of my paper is, that strong institutions on both sides and a more or less intense and institutionalized co-operation between capital and labour served (and still serve) as a strong pillar of the welfare state in (West) Germany.

My paper summarizes the development of the relations between business organizations and trade unions by focusing on certain decisive years: 1950-52, 1967-69, 1974-76, and 1985-90 - decisive as regards the construction and stabilization of *Sozialpartnerschaft*. By doing this I hope to be able to show how and explain why business organizations and trade unions in West Germany co-operated and why their efforts were successful since 1945.

The main findings are as follows:

-German business organizations tried to maintain their traditional powerful position after 1945 not by attacking the trade unions but by co-operating as far as necessary. When the political environment was unfavorable – as in the early postwar period or in the early 1970s – they came to terms with facts as they are, but tried to change these conditions step by step in their favour;

-the business organizations preferred formal, institutionalized frameworks to co-operate with the unions – especially as the corporatist 'Concerted Action' (*Konzertierte Aktion*) and other formal structures gave them the opportunity to discuss certain topics informally outside these structures if necessary;

-personal factors did not play such an important role as one may expect: It was during the presidency of the old-fashioned Fritz Berg, that the BDI joined the 'Concerted Action' – and it was a relatively young and modern President like Michael Rogowski, who criticized the German co-determination regime in 2004;

-that branch interests or the rivalry between the BDI and the BDA shaped the conceptions of industrial relations and the respective politics: The BDI for the most part played the role of the hardliner, whereas the BDA was more able to compromise vis-à-vis the trade unions - and branches like the building industry, that had a long tradition of co-operation between employers and employees were more interested in working together in a spirit of partnership than branches without such a tradition.