

Germany: Lothar Bisky, leading member of the Left Party, dies

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Lothar Bisky, one of the most influential figures in the Left Party, died on Monday just days before his 72nd birthday.

Bisky was chairman of the forerunner of the Left Party—the Party of Democratic Socialism PDS—from 1993 to 2000, and from 2003 to 2007. Together with Oskar Lafontaine he led the Left Party from its founding in 2007 up to 2010. During this period he was also a prominent figure in the European Left, which included amongst its members SYRIZA (Greece), the French Communist Party and Left Party, and the Danish Red-Green Alliance.

Bisky was not so prominently in the public spotlight as other Left Party leaders such as Lafontaine and Gregor Gysi. He worked in the background. Obituaries described him as a “quiet authority”, as a “meek” man operating as an “intermediary between the party wings”, or “puppet master.” Nevertheless, Bisky left his mark on the policy of the PDS and Left Party like no other. The aim of this policy was to integrate the former Stalinist East Germany (GDR) into West German capitalism, and suppress resistance to the disastrous social consequences.

Arno Widmann, co-founder of the Green *taz* newspaper and current head of the Feuilleton section of the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, made Bisky’s acquaintance at the time of German reunification. Bisky was in the process of dissolving the Berliner Verlag, which published several East German newspapers, and worked with Widmann to organize the distribution of the *taz* in the GDR.

In his obituary of Bisky, Widmann writes that, unlike German Chancellor Angela Merkel and President Joachim Gauck who made the move from the GDR to West Germany largely as individuals, Bisky and a number of others had another objective: “They wanted cadres and followers of the SED (Socialist Unity Party—former Stalinist ruling party in the GDR) to accompany them on their journey to the new Germany. They were not

motivated by noble objectives. Or at least not merely by such objectives. They wanted to transfer the ideas—and probably some of the money—of the old SED to the Federal Republic.”

This is a pretty accurate description of the role of the PDS. It fully supported the introduction of capitalism despite the devastating consequences for the working class. At the same time the party wanted to ensure that not just a few individuals, but an entire social layer that occupied a prominent and privileged social position in the GDR could benefit from the free-market system.

At the age of 18 years, Bisky, who had grown up under poor conditions in the West German state of Schleswig-Holstein, slipped across the fence that at the time separated the German Federal Republic from the GDR. In East Germany he was able to finish school and go on to higher studies—a path which for financial reasons would not have been open to him in the west.

He studied philosophy and cultural studies, joined the SED in 1963, and undertook an academic career that eventually led him in 1986 to head the University for Film and Television in Potsdam. Like many intellectuals, Bisky was critical of some aspects of the GDR, without this ever taking the form of open opposition. After the suppression of the Prague Spring in 1968 he allegedly considered quitting the SED, but decided instead to pursue his career. To this end he enjoyed the full confidence of the SED and was able to travel abroad freely.

Bisky first emerged on the political stage on November 4, 1989. Along with two dozen other speakers he addressed the one million demonstrators protesting at Berlin’s central Alexanderplatz against the SED regime. Five days later the Berlin Wall fell, the SED parted company with some of its most hated leaders, and took the road to the introduction of capitalism and German reunification.

Hans Modrow, the last SED premier of the German

Democratic Republic and for many years honorary chairman of the PDS, later wrote about this period: “According to my understanding of things the path to unity was absolutely necessary and had to be pursued with determination.” Modrow’s former economics minister, Christa Luft, founded the trust, which transferred state owned enterprises in the GDR into private hands. She went on to author a book entitled *The Joy of Ownership* .

It was against this background that Bisky commenced his meteoric rise to political prominence. He worked on the committee that prepared the crucial Party Congress of October 1989, which engineered the change of the SED into the PDS. In 1993, three years after German reunification, he took over the chairmanship of the federal PDS.

Bisky used his arbitration abilities to hold together the fractious wings of the party and provide cover for Gregor Gysi who represented the party publicly. Both worked closely together to cement the PDS to the bourgeois state and rid the party of all remnants of Marxist rhetoric.

“Gysi and Bisky were the team that led the PDS clientele into the complex West German reality,” declares an obituary on *Spiegel Online*. “It’s hard to say whether the PDS would have found the way to the Federal Republic without Bisky—or whether it would have cut itself off and re-ideologised under the constant attacks of having worked for the Stasi [GDR secret police].”

Bisky played the same role 10 years later in relation to Oskar Lafontaine. The former SPD chairman took the initiative to found the Left Party in 2005 in order to create a focal point for voters who had turned their backs on the social democrats following the latter’s introduction of the anti-social Hartz laws. The task of the Left Party was to prevent such layers from turning to a revolutionary perspective. After the official launch of the Left Party in June 2007, the two joint chairmen—Lafontaine and Bisky—worked in tandem for three years in the midst of the deepest international economic crisis since the 1930s.

In addition to his party posts Bisky held various parliamentary positions. In 1990 he was a deputy in last GDR parliament (People’s Chamber). From 1990 to 2005 he represented the PDS in the Brandenburg state parliament. Between 1992 and 1994 he headed the committee of inquiry that exculpated Brandenburg premier, Manfred Stolpe (SPD), from charges of collaboration with the Stasi. In 2005 Bisky was elected to the Bundestag and from 2009 to 2012 he sat in the European Parliament.

As chairman of the Group of the European United Left

(GUE / NGL) Bisky made his long political experience available to the Greek SYRIZA and other organizations that played a key role in suppressing resistance to the austerity measures of the European Union and the German government. At the same time, Bisky’s right-wing, pro-imperialist views increasingly came to the forefront.

At the start of March 2011 he supported a resolution calling for military intervention in Libya, which then took place a few days later. Deputies from the conservative right, the Social Democrats and Greens also voted for the resolution.

On June 13 this year, when he had already resigned from the European Parliament, Bisky published an appeal together with other leaders of the Left Party calling for the defense of the euro and the European Union. Under conditions where broad layers of the population increasingly identify the EU as the driving force for social cuts, mass unemployment and state repression, Bisky wrote: “The project of European integration has ... led to political stability in Europe, to the civil negotiation of conflicts of interest within Europe in a manner unseen previously.” The Left, he said, “must therefore fight to ensure there is no departure from the path of European integration.”

The obituaries on Bisky show that even his political opponents appreciate his contributions to the preservation of the bourgeois order. The president of the European Parliament, Martin Schulz (SPD), described him as “a wonderful colleague and human being”, while the chairman of the Free Democratic Party, Philipp Rösler, who is certainly no friend of the Left Party, praised him as “someone who had clearly drawn lessons from the SED past.”



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