THE DEBATE WITHIN GERMAN SOCIETY
A REASONABLE “YES”:
THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATS AND WEST GERMAN
REARMAMENT, 1945–1956

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On a May evening in 1950, the assembled party congress of the West German Social Democratic Party (SPD) waited to hear from their leader. The man who walked onto the stage was one of the most familiar faces in German politics and one whose body bore the scars of a life spent in opposition. Kurt Schumacher was only 55 but looked a great deal older. Badly wounded on the Eastern Front during World War I, he had only one arm. Two years before, doctors had amputated a leg damaged during nearly 11 years in the camps and prisons of the Third Reich. Aging and broken in body, there were few politicians in the young Federal Republic more formidable, courageous, or self-assured. In a country full of tangible reminders of war, Schumacher’s physical status seemed to give him a special legitimacy.

The dominant figure of the post-war center-left, Schumacher came to Hamburg ready to do battle. The Social Democrats found themselves in retreat, bested by their rivals in parliamentary elections the year before. Unable to block legislation that he believed endangered the future of Germany, Schumacher delivered a blistering attack on the government of Konrad Adenauer, on the Soviet Union, and on the western Allies that until recently had occupied western Germany.

“Our critics say that the Social Democrats are negative. Indeed, the Social Democrats have said ‘No,’ but we have always also offered a realistic, positive, reasonable ‘yes.’” “No,” said the party, to the post-war division of Germany and Poland at the line of the Oder and Neisse rivers, to the Soviet suppression of the Social Democrats in the east, to the German loss of the Saarland, and a stout no to the Petersberg Agreement that set the terms of West German (Federal Republic of Germany; FRG) relations with the western Allies. “We say yes,” Schumacher thundered, “with all our hearts, to a Europe of equal and free people.”