Helsinki Final Act and Détente (July 26, 1985)

Abstract

The signing of the Helsinki Final Act in 1975 did not reshape the European order, but it did have important consequences, nevertheless. Christoph Bertram, then foreign affairs editor of the weekly *Die Zeit* (and later director of the German Institute for Foreign and Security Affairs), highlights some of the subtle changes in Central and Eastern Europe and in relations among European states that resulted from the ongoing Helsinki process.

Source

A Bilge Keel for Détente
Taking Stock and Looking Ahead Ten Years after Helsinki

In Helsinki, where ten years ago they ceremoniously adopted the "Final Act of the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe," representatives of the thirty-five signatory states will meet again next week. Things won't be quite as glamorous as they were back then, nor as hopeful; the euphoria of détente has long since evaporated.

A mere ten years ago, the most important men of the first and second worlds gathered for a group photo in Finland's capital: Brezhnev and Ford, Giscard and Schmidt, Tito and Trudeau along with twenty-nine others. The conference, as the *Europa-Archiv* wrote at the time, was "the most memorable diplomatic enterprise of this century," hard to grasp in its importance and impact. Only those opposed knew exactly what to think of it. A "carnival of mock-ups," intoned the CDU parliamentary group back then. A comedy, pronounced French writer Raymond Aron: "Never before has a conference lasted this long and gathered together so many diplomats to produce such laughable results." And even Henry Kissinger, who participated in 1975 as the American Secretary of State and who was never at a loss for catchy phrases, balked at having anything memorable coaxed out of him when a Yugoslav journalist asked him in the corridors of the conference to say "something historic."

The ten intervening years have answered the question of what the Helsinki Conference can and cannot do. It did not redraw the borders in Europe, they had long since been nailed down on the map of Europe by force of fact and had been recognized, even before the meeting, in West Germany's treaties with Eastern European countries. It did not make disarmament possible; one innovation by the Conference, the "confidence-building" measures of reciprocal information about upcoming military movements, have remained a timid, poor relation of arms control. Helsinki articulated the "free exchange of people and ideas" between East and West as a goal but was unable to bring it about.

The barriers of the Eastern system were simply too high for a mere declaration of intent to overcome. Just now we have been reminded of them again: shortly before the tenth anniversary, the Swiss chapter of Amnesty International accused the Soviet Union of torturing political prisoners, and the Intra-German Ministry in Bonn reported on the many different prohibitions that are still used to bar GDR citizens from having contact with West Germans. Anyone who ever hoped that the Helsinki Final Act would lead to a breakthrough in unhindered cooperation between East and West has been disabused of that notion by the events of the past ten years.

Important Experiences

But this initially disappointing balance sheet is counterbalanced by three important experiences:

First: the Final Act did not prove to be a mere confirmation of the European status quo, as the Soviets had intended. They saw the Final Act above all as a replacement for a European peace treaty to their liking—the multilateral recognition of the socialist camp and its borders. But Moscow was not able to assert itself with this concept. Rather, it had to pay for the desired recognition of the existing situation with the legitimization of change, also in its own sphere of influence.

As disappointingly slow as that change may be, as humiliating as the repeated violent containment of more tumultuous upheavals, like Solidarity in Poland, may be—no one can deny today that the sphere of individual freedom has expanded in the countries of Eastern Europe. Did Helsinki tip the balance in this regard? That cannot be proven. But one thing is clear: the Conference did provide flanking support to the process of change. After all, changes in the East-West relationship are not possible in opposition to the communist regimes, but ultimately only with their acquiescence. They can neither be pushed through by way of political destabilization as practiced by Herbert Hupka nor by unbridled harping on about principles in the style of Jimmy Carter; at best, they can happen as the result of a measured but steady development. Nobody could expect that the countries of the East would throw the gates wide open to this development. But they have been forced, also with the help of Helsinki, to open the door at least a crack.

Second: Helsinki is diplomacy in instalments. What Aron criticized as weakness, the endless meetings of countless diplomats, is in reality the genius idea of the undertaking. Détente is not a state but a process, and the fact that Helsinki will never be finished reflects that. The preparatory conference is followed by the main conference, the main conference by the expert discussion, the expert discussion by the follow-up conference—the ball remains in play. Again and again the achievements are diplomatically hedged by new agreements, time and again the actions of governments are measured against their words. Thus, in spite of the non-binding nature of the Final Act in terms of international law, a standard for international conduct is emerging in this way.

Third: Helsinki has Europeanized and thereby stabilized the East-West relationship. The Final Act and the follow-up conferences have put a keel under the wobbling ship of détente, and while this does not prevent sharp swings, it does reduce them—especially those arising from discord between Moscow and Washington. This has not evened out the differences in power and weight between the major and minor players; the most recent past has shown that if the world powers do not get along, the room for maneuver also remains limited for their allies and for the non-aligned states. But the Helsinki Forum has opened up for the small players a field of activity, upon which they complement the relations between the superpowers and can integrate the big players into the process.

Not leaving the policy of détente solely to the major players—that was already the desire of most Europeans in 1975, when Bonn's treaties with Eastern countries, the Berlin Accord, and the disarmament agreements between Nixon and Brezhnev were combined into the most comprehensive bundle of East-West cooperation to date. Later, when things grew testier between Washington and Moscow, the security conference gave Europeans a diplomatic instrument to continue the dialogue—as in 1983 at the follow-up conference in Madrid, and even to advance it a little—as in 1984 at the Stockholm meeting about confidence-building measures. The Europeans, especially the Federal Republic of Germany, have made eager use of this instrument. The danger of a drifting apart of the West, which some had warned about in 1975, has not come to pass. On the contrary: the cooperation of the Western countries on foreign policy has seldom worked better.

[…]

And yet: the framework that was devised in Helsinki ten years ago can, amidst all of the uncertainties, provide a basis for the next stage in East-West diplomacy. The procedure and the goal for the policy of détente in Europe have been laid out. The bilge keel is in place. It kept the ship from capsizing in recent years, when the waves of distrust between East and West swelled. That is why the ministers are not gathering next week for a class reunion of reminiscences. They can continue to build the future.

Source: Christoph Bertram, “Ein Schlingerkiel für die Entspannung“, *Die Zeit*, Nr. 31/1985. © Die Zeit. Republished with permission. Available online at https://www.zeit.de/1985/31/ein-schlingerkiel-fuer-die-entspannung

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

Recommended Citation: Helsinki Final Act and Détente (July 26, 1985), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/two-germanies-1961-1989/ghdi:document-5049> [October 12, 2024].