

East-West dialogue

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From 1955, Nikita Khrushchev, who succeeded Stalin in the Kremlin, developed a policy of peaceful coexistence. Boosted by the advances that it had made in thermonuclear power and the space race, the USSR wanted to use the new climate of peace in the world to take the rivalry between itself and the United States onto a purely ideological and economic level. The first tangible consequence of the new Soviet policy was the accord on Austria in May 1955. The Austrian State Treaty gave the country back its independence, subject to its permanent neutrality. In the same year, Austria, which had been a member of the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC) since its foundation in 1948, became a member of the United Nations (UN) and the Council of Europe.

But the West was rather suspicious of the new political stance adopted by the Soviet Union. Suspicion and fear, those characteristic Cold War attitudes, led Europe to include the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) in its defence strategy and the USA to extend its nuclear umbrella to Western Europe.

From 18 to 21 July 1955, the Heads of Government of the four great powers (the United States, the United Kingdom, France and the USSR) met in Geneva. It was their first summit meeting for ten years. The negotiations focused on European security, disarmament and East-West relations. Although the four powers did not reach agreement, especially as far as the fate of Germany was concerned, contact was not broken off. There was even talk of a new 'Geneva spirit', referring to the peaceful climate which had inspired the League of Nations in the interwar years.