

'The double error about Helsinki' from the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (24 October 1977)


Caption: On 24 October 1974, German daily newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung welcomes the success of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) and points out the diplomatic mistakes made in Helsinki by the Soviet negotiators.

Source: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. Zeitung für Deutschland. Hrsg. EICK, Jürgen; WELTER, Erich; FACK, Fritz Ullrich; DESCHAMPS, Bruno; FEST, Joachim; REIßMÜLLER, Johann Georg. 24.10.1977, n° 247. Frankfurt/Main: FAZ Verlag GmbH. "Der doppelte Irrtum über Helsinki", auteur:Gillesen, Günther , p. 12.

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http://www.cvce.eu/obj/the_double_error_about_helsinki_from_the_frankfurter_allgemeine_zeitung_24_october_1977-en-b7f3oedo-195c-4548-abdf-e5237f065a11.html

Last updated: 06/07/2016



The double error about Helsinki

Why the Soviet Union lost its grip on the security conference project

By Günther Gilleßen

Belgrade, October

The purposeful and resolute way in which the Soviet Union strove, for so many years, to persuade the Western countries to attend a European security conference is still fresh in the memory. The Soviet Union had conceived this idea with two aims in mind, one static and one dynamic. The first was to organise a substitute peace conference, at which Western signatures would endorse the 'outcome of the Second World War'; the second was to sound a clarion call for peace that would help to undermine the twin pillars of the defence of the West: the presence of the Americans in Europe and the existence of the Atlantic Alliance. Later, a third aim entered into the Soviet Union's calculations: securing Western capital and Western expertise to assist the development of the Soviet economy.

The 'security conference' was so much a Soviet invention that the immediate general impression in the West was that the West could only lose by it.

By the late 1960s, however, and despite the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia, little remained of the West's formerly unanimous rejection of the security conference. There were various reasons for this change, including numerous signs of erosion within the Alliance. Indeed, this period saw the start of a 'mad rush to Moscow by the politicians of Western Europe' (Kissinger). This seemed to confirm that the Soviet Union, with its campaign of détente in Western Europe, had set in motion a train of events that was running Russia's way and could no longer be halted. The Soviet Union, too, clearly saw matters in that light

How was the West able, in Helsinki, to wriggle out of its assigned role of victim into that of main beneficiary? There were several explanations, though they were not understood, or were misunderstood, at that time.

First, the assumption that the forthcoming security conference would benefit only the Soviet Union prompted the Nato countries to demand various concessions in exchange: an agreement on Berlin, together with Russian participation in a conference on troop reductions in the central part of Europe, and, finally, special conditions applying to the security conference itself: the Americans and Canadians must participate, and an item entitled 'Free movement for individuals, information and ideas' must be added to the agenda. The Soviet Union agreed to all these concessions: the Russians were confident that they could abandon many of them again during the negotiations and come out on top. Even so, the effect was that the two North American States, instead of being driven out of the European theatre, were recognised as 'European' powers. (The Four Power Agreement on Berlin, of course, became a contradictory document, while troop reductions are still being discussed in the Hofburg Palace in Vienna. Apart from its own participation, the Soviet Union has still made no concessions here.)

The actual benefit which the Soviet Union hoped to derive from the security conference was lost as soon as the West had accepted that the conference was unavoidable and begun to prepare for it. The Nato Council's preparations immediately changed the entire picture. The members of the Alliance, whose resolve had begun to weaken during the bilateral contacts with the Soviet Union (and in the course of German *Ostpolitik*), rapidly closed ranks again. The centrifugal forces exerted upon the West by the policy of détente were cancelled out as soon as that policy became multilateral. The Western countries rediscovered their capacity to coordinate their actions and to correct any deviations from their joint course. That capacity was, incidentally, frequently underestimated by both sides.

The role of the neutrals

A second important reason why the conference project underwent a change of course arose from the

involvement of the unaligned European countries. Their interest in the conference proved to be even stronger than that of the Soviets. Their participation not only broadened the scope of the conference but provided it with a more expressive sounding-board. For the neutrals, this was the first opportunity for them since the Second World War to make their mark in foreign policy. The neutrals and the group of non-aligned States viewed the conference as a great opportunity, one which they were determined to seize. West and East alike had underestimated the impact that this would have on the conference. It transpired that none of these unaligned countries would offer any assistance to the Soviet Union at the conference: all of them, some more than others, helped in effect to strengthen the positions adopted by the West.

A third reason was the timing. By the time that the first preparatory meeting was eventually held in Helsinki in late 1972, the 'policy of confrontation' in the West had already passed its high point of emotional susceptibility. Its ability to divide and mobilise internal policy was already on the wane. This applied to West Germany as well, after the Treaties had been signed with the countries of Eastern Europe and the controversy over them had died down. Significantly, when the Helsinki negotiations began, Chancellor Brandt's fortunes were in decline. Soviet hopes of using a pacifist campaign to turn the Western public against its own governments and wash away the foundations of Western equilibrium were no longer realistic, if indeed they ever had been. The public in the West found its way back to a middle-of-the-road position that made it easier to revert to an East-West policy of damping down and controlling the European political conflict, though once again paying greater attention to the risks.

Fourthly, the West and the neutrals negotiated skilfully in Helsinki and Geneva. They knew what they wanted, and the Soviet Union made many concessions simply so as to bring the conference to a 'successful' conclusion. As it transpired, Russian diplomats and those responsible for planning Soviet foreign policy were not nearly as skilful as the self-deprecating West often assumes.

The main failure of Soviet diplomacy in Helsinki was that it did not succeed in reconciling the difference between the static and dynamic aspects addressed by the conference. The Russian negotiators set great store by placing on record various principles of international law that were supposed to show that Soviet possessions in Eastern Europe were inalienable. However, by the time that they were able to secure Western assent to all these principles, the single-edged swords of the Soviet assertions had been blunted, and the list of principles had been supplemented on the basis of the traditions of Western international law and equilibrium thus restored. The 'immutability' of frontiers became inviolability, leaving the way open to peaceful change by consent; and the principle of 'non-intervention' was pruned back to its international law definition: the prohibition of intervention by physical force. Limits were set upon national sovereignty by stressing the duty of a State to respect the fundamental freedoms of its citizens. There was also one important distinction. Some of these principles, mainly those on which the Soviet Union had banked, merely prohibited certain acts (the use of force, the violation of territorial integrity, disregard for the sovereign equality of states). To satisfy these requirements, a State merely has to adopt the appropriate passive attitude. But there are other principles, notably respect for fundamental freedoms and compliance with obligations under international law, which in effect require States in particular to take positive action. Where their governmental practices are at variance with these principles, they must be modified accordingly. Thus, after Helsinki, the West was in a position to call for compliance with these principles. The same applies to the specific humanitarian provisions: freedom of information, family reunification, and freedom to emigrate, which formed part of what was known as the 'third basket'.

Benefits of unity

Thus, these dynamic aspects of the conference project worked in favour of the West, while the Soviet Union adhered firmly to the static aspects and so found itself on the defensive. The provisions that Moscow, in the expectation of rather different results, had wanted to see adopted to ensure the sustained effect of a pan-European security conference — provisions designed to ensure that such conferences became regular events and that the Final Document of Helsinki was widely publicised — produced the reverse of the intended effect. The side that emerged from the conference in the more advantageous position also enjoyed the bonus of the follow-up provisions. These strengthened the effect of the dynamic aspects of the Final Act. The inhabitants of Eastern Europe received a signal from the Final Act, and the Western States had a formal right

to respond to them.

The fifth, hardly predictable reason for success was that a civil rights movement in Eastern Europe received a boost and seized the opportunity offered to it by the Helsinki document. The future scale of that movement in the Soviet Union, Poland and Czechoslovakia, and in East Germany as well — varying slightly from country to country — was something that no one could foresee. But it was greater than expected. Since then, it has been possible to publicise these Eastern European movements in the West and then provide feedback to Eastern Europe, thus in effect both strengthening the civil rights movement and, to some extent, protecting it.

The Soviet Union has thus come under heavy pressure to live up to expectations and justify its acts, and that pressure may yet increase. The fact that the entire polarity of the idea of the conference was reversed is, by and large, neither a miracle nor a stroke of fortune. It is the achievement of Western unity, both within the Nato States and in their association with the neutral countries of Europe.