

Televised address given by Willy Brandt (7 December 1970)

Caption: On 7 December 1970, in a televised address broadcast in Warsaw by the West German channels, Chancellor Willy Brandt emphasises the importance of the treaty concluded that same day between the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and Poland.

Source: The Treaty between the Federal Republic of Germany and the People's Republic of Poland. Bonn: Press and Information Office of the Federal Government, 1971. 200 p. p. 21-23.

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Address made by the Federal Chancellor from Warsaw on Television (7 December 1970)

My fellow-countrymen,

I am well aware that this has been a difficult journey to make but it is one that will be of consequence for the future. The Warsaw treaty should write an end to the sufferings and sacrifices of an iniquitous past. It should build a bridge between the two States and their peoples. It should open the way to bringing divided families back together again and make frontiers less divisive.

That being said, it would not have been possible to sign this treaty without having earnestly examined one's conscience. We did not take this decision lightheartedly. We are haunted by memories, by frustrated hopes. But our conscience is clear, for we are convinced that, in order to achieve a European peace order, tensions must be eliminated, treaties on the renunciation of force observed, relations improved and suitable forms of cooperation found.

In the pursuit of these aims we have to start from what actually exists and from what has developed. This also applies in respect of Poland's western frontier. No one has compelled us to take this view; we have come of age. The point now is to prove that we have come of age and that we have the courage to acknowledge reality.

What I said when I spoke to you from Moscow holds good for the treaty with Poland also; it does not surrender anything that was not gambled away long ago, and gambled not by us who hold and held political responsibility in the Federal Republic of Germany but gambled away by a criminal régime, by National Socialism.

We must not forget that what the Polish nation had to suffer after 1939 was worse than anything else it had had to endure in the course of its history. This injustice has not remained without consequences.

Our nation too suffered great distress, especially our East German compatriots. We must be fair: the greatest sacrifices were made by those whose fathers, sons or brothers lost their lives, but next to them it is those who had to leave their homeland who paid the most harshly for the war.

I refuse to accept legends, whether German or Polish: it is impossible to write the history of the German East arbitrarily.

Our Polish partners know what I wish to tell you at home in all clearness: this treaty does not mean that we acknowledge injustice or justify acts of violence. It does not mean that we give legal force to subsequent expulsion.

Resentment is an affront to respect for the grief that laments what has been lost — lost "in anguish, war and, alas, in unquenched tears", as Andreas Gryphus, the Silesian, put in at the end of the Thirty Years' War. No one can escape this grief. We are distressed at what has been lost, and the hard-trying nation will respect our affliction.

For a long time to come, names like Auschwitz will be in the minds of both nations and will remind us that hell on earth is possible. We have experienced it. But this very experience compels us to tackle the problems of the future with resolution. Escape from reality creates dangerous illusions. I maintain, therefore, that to uphold this treaty, reconciliation and peace, is to accept German history in its entirety.

A clear consciousness of history does not tolerate unrealizable claims, nor does it tolerate those secret reservations Immanuel Kant, the East Prussian, warns against in his essay "Towards Eternal Peace."

We must direct our gaze towards the future and see morals as a political force. We must break the chain of injustice. By doing so we pursue a policy not of surrender but of common sense.

This treaty between Poland and ourselves — a treaty, as the official title says, concerning the basis for normalizing their mutual relations — is not a substitute for a formal peace settlement. It does not affect the rights and responsibilities of the Four Powers with regard to Germany as a whole. It does not invalidate any contractual commitments previously assumed by either side.

I wish to make special mention of this because our active participation in the West European Communities and our firm place in the Atlantic Alliance naturally form the foundation from which we shall seek a new and better relationship with the peoples of Eastern Europe.

Not until we regard the treaty in this overall context does it become clear what it means for peace, for the divided German nation and for a united Europe, a Europe which can be created not by rhetorical speeches but only by resolute work.

Nothing is more important than the creation of a stable peace. There is no alternative. Peace is not possible without European solidarity. Everything that brings us closer to this goal will be a service to our nation and, above all, to posterity.