

'A building block for peace' from the Süddeutsche Zeitung (8 December 1970)

Caption: On 8 December 1970, the German daily newspaper the Süddeutsche Zeitung comments on the signing in Warsaw the previous day of the Treaty between the Federal Republic of Germany and Poland and emphasises its significance for peace in Europe.

Source: Süddeutsche Zeitung. Münchner Neueste Nachrichten aus Politik, Kultur, Wirtschaft und Sport. 08.12.1970. München: Süddeutscher Verlag. "Ein Baustein des Friedens", auteur: Birnbaum, Immanuel, p. 4.

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A building block for peace

by Immanuel Birnbaum

Anyone who thinks that the treaty between Germany and Poland that Willy Brandt and Walter Scheel have just signed in Warsaw may be judged by what the two parties have given up and what they have gained will find that the sums do not add up. The agreement by the Poles to enable their ethnic German citizens to re-settle in the Federal Republic of Germany in certain cases is not set out in the treaty. Warsaw intends to give permission for this only on its own authority and in consultation with the German Red Cross. Admittedly, it would probably never have been willing to do this in the absence of improved relations with Bonn. The main point of the treaty, however, is the border question.

This is another issue that cannot be reduced to a profit and loss account. Poland is not receiving anything of which it did not take possession 25 years ago with the approval of the signatories of the Potsdam Agreement and was not also expressly given by France later on with a confirmation that this was as of right — so, in other words, it is receiving nothing other than that which it already owns, with the good will of all our allies. The Federal Republic has kept open its claims for this question to be resolved in a different way in a clearing operation to bring about an overall peace settlement. However, it is becoming increasingly apparent that this universal peace treaty is being postponed on the political calendar till kingdom come. It has never been possible for a German Government — whether of the right or of the left — to make any serious attempt to assert these claims. The Opposition in the Bundestag is also showing sympathy for the desire of the Poles to rid themselves permanently of the nightmare of another wave of population resettlement.

The overriding aim of this treaty lies in its significance for peace in Europe. If there is no understanding between the Federal Republic of Germany and Poland on the border question, it will be impossible to make progress towards a lasting peace settlement. This is not only what is stated in the German-Soviet Treaty of 12 August 1970, it is apparent to anyone who has eyes and is also to be seen in the fact that the treaties with the NATO allies are restricted to the purpose of defending the existing borders. There can be no trade-off between two fundamentals such as peace, on the one hand, and the right to yearn for the reinstatement of historical orders of days gone by, on the other.

The historical boundaries have shifted not only for Germany but also for other countries, including, of course, Poland. The political reasoning and the legal titles involved in the losses of Polish territory to the Soviet Union are of a different kind from the legal justification for shifting the Polish borders deep into areas that had been German for 600 or 700 years. To the east of the Rivers Narov and Bug, the overwhelming majority of the population had never been of Polish nationality; they were Ukrainian, White Russian and Lithuanian. In possessing these territories, the old Poland was, as Friedrich Engels once said in a letter to his friend Marx, a 'nation fondue', a nation that had simply been artificially welded together. Today, on the other hand, Poland is a nation state where minorities are no longer an issue. Poland has not been compensated by German territory for the losses in the East but, according to the Potsdam Protocol, for Hitler's unprovoked war of aggression and its consequences. A reminder that one of these consequences was ultimately the serious injustice done to the Germans from the East by their expulsion has once again been given by Brandt in Warsaw — more effectively than any nationalist could have done.

The character of the Poland of today as a nation state may afford the new treaty greater prospects for survival in the long term than the agreements of importance to Germany and Poland concluded during the interwar period, from the Treaty of Versailles to the Geneva Convention for Upper Silesia (1922) and the Locarno Treaties (1925), right up to Hitler's Non-Aggression Pact (1934). All these agreements were concluded with express or tacit provisos, and they also left open possibilities of interpretation that led to noisy disputes at the League of Nations about the protection of minorities on both sides and to the border question being rolled out once again.

The new Warsaw Treaty is clear and final on the border question. This must be painful for many Germans from the East, although most of them have long known that the customary law has no chance of being fundamentally changed in any treaty concluded either now or in the future. The past of Eastern Germany

remains an invaluable part of German history. No one can and no one wants to demand that we should deny the part played in our inheritance by the Silesians Eichendorff and Schleiermacher, or by Schopenhauer from Danzig. But it is precisely those people who are willing to learn from history who now also have simply to accept its verdict here, a verdict that has separated the present and the future from the past.