

Interview with Leo Tindemans: the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (Brussels, 24 February 2006)

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[Étienne Deschamps] In 1975 you took part in the Helsinki Summit on the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. What did it deal with, and what can you recall of these international negotiations and the signing of this agreement?

[Leo Tindemans] This was an extremely important date and I am pleased to say that those who were involved... for example, the former German Chancellor, Helmut Kohl, has just written and said that a peak in his political career was the Helsinki meeting and the Helsinki Agreements; the head of French diplomacy at the time, who, as such, was therefore present in Helsinki, Andréani, has said in a speech he gave in Brussels that in his view it was the diplomatic high point of recent years. I too was present and I was directly involved; it was a high point, and I said so in my memoirs. Why was it so important? It was the meeting of East and West so the Soviet leaders were there, the two Germanys were represented, all the other countries were present, and the Finns had made careful preparations for it. Negotiations had been going on for several years in Geneva; now it was time for the diplomats to come to a peace agreement among themselves, or let us say to improve relations between East and West — that is, between the Communist world and the Western world. How was this to be done? Was there a way, not merely to discuss disarmament — discussions already took place sporadically — but to improve the atmosphere, to humanise relations between people in the world during that period? The Geneva negotiations had taken place in an extremely difficult climate. There had been no immediate agreement, and there had been interminable disputes on matters of detail, but, in the end, the outcome was Helsinki. This may not be appreciated, but no Treaty was signed in Helsinki. The document that was agreed was called the ‘Helsinki Final Act’, but there was no formal Treaty, no Convention. This is sometimes overlooked.

It was the will, the assumed goodwill of the partners, which constituted the value of the Helsinki negotiations. What was at stake? From the Soviet side, the emphasis had been, right from the end of the war, that frontiers should be recognised officially — the European frontiers as they had been established at the end of the hostilities. This, of course, therefore meant victory for the Soviet Union where there were Soviet troops, and the confirmation that there would be no further attempt to modify the frontiers by recourse to arms. That is what was at stake; that was the proposal. As a result, for a long time, the approach in political circles was: ‘It is just not possible; it would mean an unimaginable victory for the Soviet Union.’ However, others responded, rightly: ‘What you say is correct: it is a great victory for them. But it says ‘without recourse to arms’, so fine. Can one say ‘no’ — with recourse to arms? Are we to insist that reform must be possible even by resorting to arms? This will therefore mean that we are for war, and that we are going to start a war in order to change these frontiers.’ But that was not possible either. How should we react in this complex, ambiguous situation? What was the solution? How could this be done? At any rate, the Final Act was prepared; we went to Helsinki, and so forth. On the Western side, we opposed Soviet claims regarding the recognition of the frontiers in Europe as they existed at the end of the war. We demanded recognition of, and respect for, human rights, freedom of speech and expression, the rule of law, the importance of rights in justice and — what else? — all the things that we are very attached to, and for which the other side used the same expressions and the same terms, but gave a quite different meaning. I could carry on listing these.

Then, when it was time to stop and leave for the Helsinki meeting, on the Western side several people said: ‘The Soviets are going to obtain a lot of real advantages — the recognition of these frontiers — what a victory! Whereas on our side, it will just be paper.’ They can subscribe to foreign newspapers, they can read foreign books or whatever; all that was in three baskets. We shall have to be content with words and paper, while, for them, it is very real. This reached the point where even within the Belgian government, which I was a part of, there were difficulties and some quite difficult discussions, some saying: ‘What are you going to Helsinki for? It is pure theatre; it does not mean anything.’ Others, on the other hand, said: ‘Can Belgium stay at home while others discuss extremely important issues — the most important issues in diplomatic political life at present?’ In the end we went and I spoke there; I made a speech on behalf of Belgium, so I was a part of all that. And Helsinki gave extraordinary results. The frontiers did not change at once, but the revolution came from the people that lived there — not from the United States nor from the West nor from NATO. But in Poland, in Budapest, in Hungary, in Slovenia, in Eastern Germany, it was the people who

stood up against the regime. We were able to witness that: the fall of the Berlin Wall, and all that.

As for these texts, described disparagingly as ‘merely paper’, we then saw the establishment of several clubs and associations in all these Central European and East European countries, which invoked the text of the Helsinki Agreement when demanding from the authorities the right to read the foreign press, to read books, to write more freely, to speak of human rights — things which were forbidden, for one was sent to prison or to a psychiatric hospital when one dared to speak up, prior to Helsinki. This therefore gave rise to a movement, an opportunity to come forward and express oneself more freely than before. Afterwards, a very good meeting was held ten years after Helsinki, which I addressed; it took place in Geneva, and one was right to say: ‘Not everything has been carried out.’ Helsinki is not always respected, but we can say it has been carried out 40 %, 50 %, or 60 %, but that is already quite something. It is not the end, it is not all over, one can still carry on. So, you see, Helsinki came to signify... how shall I put it... a change in the climate of the Cold War in Europe. The great change. I am well aware that the Soviet Union expanded its activities in Africa all the more, but nonetheless... Here in Europe it was, after all, the most dangerous place or continent for conflicts or confrontations. Here, thanks to Helsinki, we managed to create a new climate and better understanding, a victory for our conception of human rights and other freedoms.